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Beautiful Dreamer

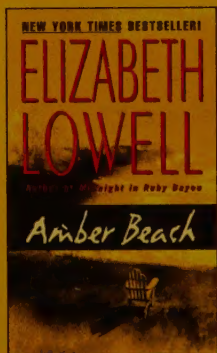
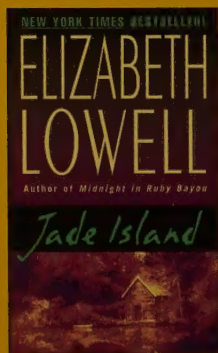
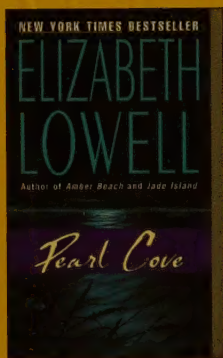
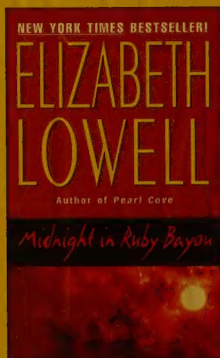


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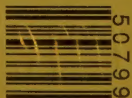
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ELIZABETH LOWELL

Beautiful Dreamer

(Originally published as *Valley of the Sun*)



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*For Heather,
daughter, friend, fan*



Prologue



THE BLUE PICKUP truck was dirty, scratched by brush, and looked too battered to pull the faded single-horse trailer behind it. The truck's tires showed the scars of passage through four-wheel-drive country.

Like the man at the wheel, there was a lot more underneath than the rough outer surface revealed. Beneath the dust and marks of hard use, the tread on the tires was thick. The pickup's engine was powerful and well tuned. The mare riding patiently inside the trailer was hot-blooded and superbly trained. A single one of her colts would have been worth more than a new truck and trailer combined.

The truck went past a sun-faded road sign that said WELCOME TO RIVERDALE: POPULATION 47.

There was neither river nor dale to greet the visitor, but there was no law against dreams.

He parked the truck in front of a country store, got out, and stretched to his full height, casting a long, wide-shouldered shadow over the afternoon land. The

store was closed. A hand-lettered placard told anyone who cared that the door opened when and if the proprietor felt like it, and if it was an emergency, you should try around at the back. Cards stuck on the outside of the dirt-streaked front window asked for workers or work, tried to buy or sell ranch equipment, and generally served as an informal newspaper.

One of the cards said simply: *Rio, if you read this, head for Nevada. A woman on a ranch called Valley of the Sun needs you.*

He pulled off the card and tossed it into the glove compartment of his pickup. There were other papers in there, sheets and cards and scraps he had gathered all over the West in the past month. The notes said essentially the same thing.

Go to the Valley of the Sun.

He shut the compartment with a snap and went around to the horse trailer. "What do you think, Dusk? You game for a few more miles?"

The elegant mare snuffled through the trailer window and lipped lazily at his open collar. He rubbed her soft muzzle, stretched again, and waited.

When the wind breathed over the high plains, he listened for the sound of his name. It came as it always did, a long sigh that called, *Brother-to-the-wind*.

And he answered as he always had. *I'm here.*

The wind turned and swirled around him, pressing at his back, pushing him south.

"You sure, brother?"

The wind pressed harder.

He got back into the truck and headed south.

One



EVEN IN LATE OCTOBER, drought ruled the Nevada ranch known as the Valley of the Sun. Thirst was a dusty shadow clinging to all life. The wind was always restless, always whispering of distance and the secrets of an empty land.

To the east of the ranch, a range of mountains known as the Sierras Perdidas rose dark and silent above the dry landscape. The mountains themselves were lush with the gifts of water—valleys thick with grass, high slopes rippling with forests, and a few sheltered snow-fields glittering like diamonds far above the sunbaked afternoon.

Hope Gardener was too far away to see the snow-fields or the water-rich valleys or the forests, but she knew they were there. They were always there, a dream to tantalize the ranchers who lived with the dry reality of the high desert that lapped around the mountains like a sagebrush sea around green islands. Even

so, Hope wouldn't have traded a single one of the tawny, thirsty, harsh sections of her ranch for all the Sierras Perdidas' easy beauty.

But she wouldn't have minded some of the Perdidas' tumbling wealth of water.

She wasn't greedy. She wasn't asking for a deep river that ran year-round, or even a stream that ran upside down, concealing its water a few feet beneath a dry riverbed. She wasn't asking for a lake shivering with wind and trout.

A pond, though . . .

Yes, just a pond. Sweet water that could ease her cattle's endless thirst. Water to soothe and nourish the tender roots of alfalfa and oat hay. Just one source of water that would stay wet no matter how dry and hard the rest of the Valley of the Sun became.

"Why not ask for hot and cold running money while you're at it?" she asked herself sardonically. "If you're going to dream, dream big."

Her generous mouth turned down in a smile at her own expense. She came from a family of dreamers. Not one of them had managed to be lucky or good enough to make the dreams real.

She had vowed to be different. She was going to be the Gardener who would make the Valley of the Sun profitable again. Or at least possible to live on without going bankrupt.

"Then I'd better get to work, hadn't I?" she asked her reflection in the dusty, cracked, sunstruck windshield.

Nothing answered her but the rumble of the diesel

engine and the wind keening through the open window of the ancient truck. She had stopped on top of a rise in the rough, one-lane dirt road to give the engine—and herself—a breather. The water truck dated from a time before power steering, automatic shift, and power brakes. Despite the strength of her deceptively elegant body, the truck gave her as much of a workout as she gave it. First gear was so cranky that she often parked on a slope and rolled downhill until she could coax the engine into second gear.

“C’mon, Behemoth. It’s just you and me and my beautiful, thirsty cattle. Don’t let me down.”

As soon as she slipped the hand brake, the empty truck began to roll. She gathered speed in neutral until she had no choice but to engage the clutch or risk losing control of the truck on the steep slope. She double-clutched, shifted, muttered unhappily, and double-clutched again. This time the ancient water truck’s gears grumbled and gnawed into place.

She patted the dusty instrument panel and settled in to wrestle the truck to the water tank. Road noises echoed around inside the truck’s sun-faded cab. The steering wheel bucked hard in her hands. Instantly she braced her body and muscled the rented army-surplus truck back out of the ruts that drew tires like a magnet drawing iron dust. Muscles in her arms and her shoulders knotted in protest. She ignored the burning aches just as she ignored the exhaustion that had made her lose attention long enough to get trapped in the ruts.

“Just one more load,” she promised herself. “Then you can kick back and watch Beauty and Baby drink.”

At least, just one more load of water for today. Tomorrow was another day, another time of Nevada's seamless sunshine baking the dry land, another string of hours when only dust devils moved over the empty land. *And this battered truck*, she reminded herself silently. *Don't forget poor Behemoth, lurching over this lousy road like a dinosaur on the way to extinction.*

Like the Valley of the Sun itself, dying.

Hope set her teeth and forced herself to pay attention to the potholed road rather than to her thoughts circling like vultures around the certainty of the death of her ranch and her dreams. She reminded herself that tomorrow could bring many things. Just one of them would be enough to keep her dream alive.

One of the old wells could begin producing water again, enough water to see a core of her breeding stock through this endless drought.

The price of beef could rise, allowing her to sell the cattle she couldn't water at break-even prices.

The bank could decide that the last hydrologist's report on Silver Rock Basin indicated a good probability of water and lend her enough money to go after it.

A hydrologist who wasn't a con artist might answer her ad and find the artesian river she believed flowed deep beneath her ranch.

It could even rain.

Hope leaned forward to peer out the dusty windshield at the Perdidas. A few wisps of water vapor clung to their rocky, rakish peaks. Not enough clouds. Not nearly enough. Rain might fall in the mountain high country in a day or two or three, but not in the

high desert of her ranch, where the land cracked and bled sand and the cattle gathered around dry wells to bawl their thirst.

For an instant her reflection stared grimly back at her from the dirty glass. The western hat concealed everything about her face but the lines of worry and weariness thinning her otherwise full mouth. Her hazel eyes were just a flash of light within the dark shadow of the hat brim. Her loosely curling, bittersweet-chocolate hair was swept up and hidden from the sun beneath the battered crown of her hat. A few tendrils had escaped to lie along her neck, held there by the moisture that heat and the effort of controlling Behe-moth had drawn from her fine-grained skin.

"Oh, boy, if your agent could only see you now," Hope muttered.

She made a face at the reflection of herself that faded even as her eyes focused on it, like a mirage shimmering above the empty desert.

"It's a good thing your fortune was in your legs, not in a pretty little-girl face. Because you aren't a little girl anymore. What will it be next birthday—twenty-six? And what do you want for your birthday, big girl? A well, you say? A nice, deep, clean, sweet, endless well?"

Hope's laughter was musical and humorous and sad. Almost twenty-six years ago her father had brought in a well that was nice and deep and clean and sweet. He had named it, and his just-born daughter, Hope. But the well hadn't been deep enough. Unless a miracle occurred, it would run dry by her twenty-sixth birthday.

The empty water truck rattled and shook down the steep grade to the Turner ranch boundary. More than miles separated the two ranches. One ranch had water. The other did not.

It was as simple and final as that.

No fences separated the two ranches. It wasn't necessary. No Turner cattle would wander miles away from water onto dry Gardener land. As for Gardener cattle, there had never been enough to wander anywhere. There had been plans, though, and dreams. Her grandfather's. Her father's. Her own.

And there had been the land, a land Hope loved as she had never loved anything else. Other girls had dreamed of boyfriends and babies, honeymoons and happily-ever-afters. Hope hadn't.

Any desire she might have had to share her girlfriends' dreams had died on her eighteenth birthday. What little trust in men and love she'd had after that night had been ground to nothing as she saw her own mother and Julie, her beautiful older sister, go through hell in the name of love.

Watching them had taught Hope to pour her faith and dreams and hungers into the land. Its tawny power called out to her senses as no man ever had.

The land endured and love did not.

Deep inside herself, she had always known that she was a woman born for enduring things. Unlike her mother, Hope knew she wouldn't be able to walk away from a man she loved. Unlike her sister, Hope couldn't go from man to man, leaving behind pieces of herself until nothing remained but a hollow smile.

A jerk from the steering wheel yanked Hope out of the unhappy past into the demanding present. She wrenched the steering wheel hard, holding the lumbering Behemoth to the rutted road.

The truck rounded a shoulder of the rugged hills and dropped down into a long, narrow valley. At the lower end of the valley, one of Turner's windmills rose thinly above the land. There was a startling flash of green around the machinery, sagebrush and willows and grass gone wild, a silent shout of vegetation signaling the presence of water.

The patch of lush green was just under ten acres. In the center of the ragged emerald saucer sat a circular metal tank that was filled to overflowing by the windmill's tireless turning. The windmill's metal straw went more than six hundred feet into the earth, sipping up water that was clean and cold and pure.

Cattle lay in the lacy shade of huge clumps of sagebrush and desert shrubs, chewing quietly, waiting for the sun to descend. The Herefords' russet hides made a rich contrast to the green oasis.

Despite Hope's weariness, she shouldered open the stubborn cab door and jumped lithely to the ground. A quick look beneath Behemoth's ungainly barrel assured her that the lower valve was closed tight. After a brief struggle with balky canvas coils, she connected the intake hose. There was another struggle to connect the hose to her patchwork pump.

The portable generator that ran the pump was so old that it had to be started with a hand crank. She had discovered the pump rusting in the barn almost three

months ago. That was when she had the idea of hauling Turner water to Gardener cattle in the hope of surviving until the rainy season began.

At first it had been a trip every three or four days through the searing August sun to supplement her ranch's overworked wells. But by October the rains still hadn't come, not even to the high country of the Sierras Perdidas. She'd made the trip to Turner's well every two days, then every day. Twice a day. Four times a day. Dawn to dusk and then even longer as the drought continued and the water table fell more and more, slowly going beyond the reach of her ranch wells.

When the wind alone couldn't draw enough water from the depths of the land, she had connected portable generators to three of her windmills. Now, on the last day of October, her generators worked around-the-clock to bring up less and less water. And Hope—Hope worked until she couldn't lift her arms to drag Behemoth around one more bumpy curve. Only then did she sleep, a sleep haunted by the bawling of thirsty cattle.

She pulled off her leather work gloves, stuck them into the hip pocket of her jeans, and picked up the battered tin bucket that leaned against the pump. Like her cattle, Behemoth's radiator had a bottomless thirst.

A gust of unseasonably hot wind swelled through the narrow valley, making the windmill's arms turn with lazy grace.

As Hope reached to dip the pail into the huge circular trough, she hesitated, caught by the beauty of water welling over the lip of the metal pond. The fluid

silver veil fell musically to the ground, creating a rich, dark ribbon of earth that cattle had churned into ankle-deep mud.

The mud didn't bother her. It made her envious. She would have moved heaven and earth to see mud like that around her own wells. Her stock tanks didn't overflow slowly, turning baked ground into a wealth of earth oozing with promise. Her own wells couldn't even keep up with the searching, dusty muzzles of her cattle.

Balancing on the plank walkway that she had made over the slick mud, she braced herself against the tank. Overflowing water was a cool shock against her thighs and a dark stain spread down her jeans. She set down the dry bucket, put her hat inside, and thrust her arms elbow-deep into the sweet water. She brought her cupped hands to her face in a silver shower of moisture and laughter that was as musical as the sound of water overflowing.

Deep within one of the nearby thickets, a horse moved restively at the sudden sound of laughter. The rider bent his dark head next to the horse's and murmured softly. The mare quieted, returning to her three-legged doze.

With the silence of a shadow, the man flowed out of the saddle. He had heard the truck's labored approach and had watched Hope's efforts to set up the makeshift hose that would fill the empty truck. He had lifted the reins to guide his horse out of the concealing brush to offer help, but something about her had stopped him.

Though obviously tired, she moved with the grace

of a wild thing as she filled the big truck's steaming radiator and coped with the ancient equipment. Slender, determined, she used an instinctive knowledge of leverage when her own strength wasn't enough to handle the awkward machinery. A hip braced here, a shoulder thrust there, a quick twist of her hands, and she coaxed the ragged canvas hose into place.

And then her laughter came, as bright and unexpected as water in a desert.

Now her faded jeans and shirt clung wetly to her, revealing a body as surprisingly lush as the dark tumble of her hair burning beneath the sun. She was long-legged, elegantly curved, and her breasts were completely outlined by the wet blouse.

He couldn't help responding to the picture she made as she stood arched against the sky, totally lost in her sensual response to the sparkling water pouring from her outstretched hands. He wondered if she would come to a man like that, nothing held back, nothing calculated, a quicksilver woman laughing and shimmering in his arms.

A slight smile softened the otherwise unyielding lines of his face. No wonder John Turner had kept trying to lure Hope into his bed by proposing marriage. If rumor was true, she kept turning him down, had been turning the rancher down since she came back to the ranch two years ago.

That had made him curious enough to ride his mare out to the well on a day that was hot enough to cure leather. He'd wanted to see a woman who cared more for a doomed ranch than she did for any man, even a rich white-eyes.

Any other woman would have given in to the inevitability of sinking water tables and drought-ridden land. Any other woman would have shaken off the Valley of the Sun's brutal demands like a dog coming out of water and would have been happy to curl up at Turner's big feet.

But not this woman. She was out here alone, a battered tin bucket in one hand and her dreams in the other.

Hope put on her hat, filled the bucket, primed the pump, pulled on her gloves with a few practiced motions, and began wrestling with the crank that was supposed to start the generator. The iron handle was long and had been in the direct sunlight. Even through leather gloves, the rough iron felt warm.

Like Behemoth, the machine was stubborn. Hope had to use both hands and a lot of determination just to make the crank turn. To make it turn fast enough to start the generator took every bit of strength she had.

With a grimace she forced her tired arms to drag the crank around quickly. The generator sputtered and almost caught. Encouraged, she worked harder, thinking of her beautiful black breeding cattle waiting by their hot, dry trough. Far too hot for October, nearly November. Far too dry.

If it wasn't for this wretched generator, she would have been forced to sell off the last of her range cattle and the first of her Angus. The thought gave strength to her aching arms. The generator coughed and shivered, but refused to catch.

"Let me help."

The quiet male voice startled Hope. She let go of the crank and whirled around.

Only the man's quickness saved her from getting a painful rap as the crank's long iron handle leaped upward, completing the circuit she had begun. He lifted her out of danger with one arm and with the other hand snagged the crank handle.

Automatically Hope balanced herself by putting her hands on his shoulders. Even as she wondered who he was, her senses registered the bunched strength of his arms and the long, resilient muscles of his torso and legs.

The man moved and she found herself safely on her feet again as suddenly as she had been snatched off them.

"I—thanks," she managed.

He nodded but didn't look away from the generator.

Hope watched while he worked the ancient machine with a power and coordination that fascinated her. He was well over six feet tall, long-limbed, wide-shouldered. The hair that showed beneath his battered Stetson was thick and straight, as blue-black as a raven flying through the desert sky. His clothes were dusty from riding, but otherwise clean. A shadow of satin-black hair showed in the open front of his faded blue work shirt. His skin was dark, almost mahogany. His boots were like his leather belt—supple, worn, of the highest quality. The buckle closing his belt was smooth silver with an intricate inlay of turquoise, coral, and mother-of-pearl.

She recognized the Zuni workmanship and the cryp-

tic symbols telling of a shaman calling down rain upon the thirsty land. Gradually she realized that the buckle was not an ornament for this man. Like his hair and his skin, the symbols were part of his heritage.

The generator surged into life, sucking water from the circular trough. The hose leading to the truck began to swell. She watched as the man studied the generator, made an adjustment in the hose coupling, and listened with a cocked head to the engine's racket. In some ways he reminded her of her stallion, Storm Walker. There was a physical assurance about him that spoke of horizons explored, tests passed, and a primal awareness of his life in relation to the land around him.

The hose became as tight as a sausage. Water shot out in a fine spray from the coupling he had adjusted. There was less water wasted than usual, because he had tightened the coupling more securely than Hope ever had been able to.

"Sorry," she said, laughing and ducking as mist beaded her face. "I should have warned you about the connection."

He could have gotten away from the spray. Instead, he swept off his hat, unbuttoned his shirt, and let the cool water bathe him as he worked over the coupling.

She watched, fascinated in ways she didn't understand. Unlike most cowboys, the stranger didn't have a line of chalk-white skin beneath the band of his hat. Nor was his chest white beneath the open shirt. Despite the desert's harsh sun, it was obvious that he spent at least part of his time hatless and bare to the waist. It was also obvious that he was a man fully alive to all of

his senses. His naked appreciation of the water struck a primitive chord within her.

His hands both coaxed and coerced the metal threads of the coupling into a tighter mating. As he worked, water drops beaded brightly over the tanned skin and smoothly coiling muscles of his arms and back. Slowly the spray diminished to little more than a sheen of moisture trickling from the corroded brass and sun-bleached canvas.

He shook back a thick wedge of hair from his forehead and replaced his hat. "Sometimes the best part of life is an accident that goes right." His voice was deep, calm, subtly gentled by a southwestern drawl.

With a brief touch he led her away from the noisy generator into the lacy shade of a clump of brush. Using quick glances, he checked the fat hose and the generator and the well.

"You can't be a cowboy," Hope said in a low voice, thinking aloud as she watched him.

He looked at her suddenly. She saw that his eyes were blue-black, clear, almost shocking in their intensity. They were also as aloof and private as a winter sky.

"Most cowboys have white foreheads and chests," she explained, feeling more than a little foolish.

His smile took her by surprise. At first glance she had simply thought of him as another range rider—taller than most, yes, and stronger, but still just one more cowhand. Then he had opened himself to the diamond spray of water and smiled, and his words had

revealed the humor and intelligence beneath his tanned face.

She took off her work glove and held out her right hand. "Hope Gardener."

He held out his hand and said simply, "Rio."

Two



RIO'S BIG HAND enveloped Hope's. She had a distinct sensation of warmth and strength before his hand released hers. She watched him pull on his worn leather work glove again. Like his voice, his eyes, and his coordination, his hand was unexpected. Long fingers tapered to well-kept nails, hard strength that was careful of her softer flesh. It was the hand of a musician or a surgeon.

But there were scars across his knuckles, and a quickness that could either comfort or threaten.

The realization made uneasiness streak through her. She remembered another man with scarred knuckles. John Turner didn't have any comfort in him at all. Yet Rio did. She was certain of it. There was both gentleness and warmth in his smile.

More important at the moment, there was reassurance in his way of being close to her without crowding her sexually. Turner had been good at that kind of intimidation. He still was.

Sighing unconsciously, she relaxed with Rio as she had relaxed with few men since her eighteenth birthday.

"Rio," she murmured.

Her hazel eyes shifted focus, turning inward. She had heard that name before. Just Rio. No first or last or middle name. Spanish for "river." She tried to remember if it was Mason who had mentioned Rio.

"I keep thinking I've heard that name before," she said.

"Maps," he offered laconically, his smile lurking just on the point of release. "Rio Bravo. Rio Colorado. Rio—"

"Verde and Amarillo and Grande," she finished, her voice as dry as his. But unlike him, she smiled openly even though she sensed that he wasn't going to say any more about himself. "And a whole lot of other *rios* I've never even heard of, I'd bet."

"You'd win," he agreed. "The Indians were here first, but the Spanish knew how to write. And since white men couldn't wrap their tongues around Indian words . . ." Rio shrugged, not finishing his sentence. The maps spoke for themselves: Spanish rather than Indian names.

Without bothering to button his shirt, he swiftly tucked it into his jeans. "Hear you're looking for water."

She barely listened to his words. His quickness fascinated her, as did his grace. She decided that he was more like a mountain cat than a stallion. Or maybe he was some of both, a legend born out of its time,

trapped in a century that had neither appreciation of nor use for myth. Nor, she admitted silently, for Indians themselves.

It must have been hell for a man of Rio's intelligence to suffer the casual abuse of bigots.

Then the meaning of Rio's near-question penetrated her wandering thoughts. "Er, yes. I ran several ads for a hydrologist."

" 'Willing to take risks,' " he quoted softly. "Like you. You're a gambler." His voice was dark and certain. "You're a dreamer, too. And I'm a man who finds water."

Hope's smile slipped. *Gambler. Dreamer.* Obviously he had read her ad and thought little of her chances of finding water. Grimly she waited for the rest of his act. She had heard it all before, from other con artists. The words varied, but the meaning didn't: she had a glowing, water-filled future if she would just trust him with her small savings.

Patiently, gathering her dream around her like armor, Hope braced herself for the disappointment of having this intriguing stranger turn into another con man who had come to the Valley of the Sun to see how many dollars he could wring from her hopes.

Even if he wasn't a con artist, she told herself bitterly, what made a drifting cowboy think that he could find water where certified hydrologists had failed? And what vast store of experience gave him the right to make fun of her and her attempts to save her ranch?

Because that was what he was doing. He was offering to work for her and at the same time he was saying that it was useless.

Gambler.

Dreamer.

"No." Hope's voice was as cool and impersonal as water flowing over the steel lip of the tank. "I'm neither a gambler nor a fool. I believe there is a fighting chance of finding artesian water beneath the Valley of the Sun. That's all I ask. A fighting chance."

Rio's dark eyes narrowed as he measured the change in her. Now he could believe that this slender, lonely young woman had refused John Turner and every other prowling male in the West's Basin and Range country. The Hope who was speaking now was someone who counted no unhatched chicks, asked no favors, and took no prisoners. She knew what she wanted.

And what she wanted was the land.

He understood that. The land was what he had always wanted, the only thing that he had taken from life: the West, all of it, rich and wild.

And he was the wind moving freely over the face of that land.

"Dreamer doesn't mean fool," he said quietly.

Though she said nothing, Hope's mouth flattened even more. She had watched her sister's dreams, and her mother's. Maybe all dreamers weren't fools, but the dreamers she knew had died too soon, too disillusioned, crying for men who never loved them in return.

Hope had learned that she couldn't control other people's dreams, but she could control her own. She could ask for only what was possible.

Artesian water, not a dream of love.

Water would give back to her the one enduring thing

in her life—the Valley of the Sun. The land had been here long before drought and men who didn't love enough. The land would be here long after all men were less than dust lifting on a dry wind.

"Ask Mason," Rio said. "Then decide."

He turned and walked back into the sagebrush clump. When he emerged a moment later, he was riding a mouse-gray mare that moved as though she had been born in the wild and only recently tamed. Yet the horse was no more an average slab-sided mustang than Rio was an average tongue-tied cowhand. The mare might have been raised wild, but Arab blood ran hot in her veins and intelligence glowed in her wide dark eyes.

"She's perfect," Hope said almost reverently, thinking of Storm Walker and the incredible foals that might come of such a mating. "If you ever want to breed her, bring her to—"

"Storm Walker," Rio interrupted. "I know."

He reined the mare around Hope, riding as he had walked, with economy and grace and power. A tiny motion of his left hand lifted the mare into a long lope. He merged his body with the animal's supple movements as though he was part of her.

"Yes. Storm Walker," Hope said finally.

She was talking to herself. Only a faint hint of dust in the air remained, proof that for a time she hadn't been alone. There was no sound but that of water falling into the rapidly filling barrel of the truck. The windmill turned slowly, bringing up more water. Despite that, the level in the tank kept dropping, liquid

wealth transferred into Behemoth's steel belly, Turner water on its way to thirsty Gardener cattle.

The thought of using someone else's water didn't make Hope feel like a charity case. She would have done the same for any neighbor if she had been the one with abundant water and her neighbor's animals were bawling with thirst. John Turner had more than enough water for both ranches.

At one time her father had seen Turner's interest in her as the salvation of the Valley of the Sun. A marriage would mean money and water piped in from the Turner ranch. Her father had been wrong. Turner had wanted only Hope's body, not a woman to marry.

Then he had tried to take by force what she hadn't wanted to give.

From old habit her mind shied away from the terrifying night of her eighteenth birthday. Briskly she turned off the generator, uncoupled the hose, stuffed it into place on the truck's rack, fastened the stubborn clamps down, and swung into the cab. If she hurried, she might catch Mason before he had to drive out to the wells and refuel the generators. Mason would know about Rio. Mason knew about everyone who had ever left a mark in the West.

And despite her doubts about his honesty, Hope was certain that Rio had.

The thought of finding out more about him made her impatient with the road, the heavy truck, and her own feminine muscles. Skill, technique, and finesse could only accomplish so much. If she had Rio's easy strength, she would have gone twice as fast and not

worried about losing control of the truck on the tight corners and deep ruts.

By the time Hope drove into the ranch yard and turned off the overworked engine, she was hot and tired all over again. Even in the late afternoon the sun hadn't lost any of its intensity. It was hot for the very end of October. Much too hot. Sweat had long since replaced cool well water on her skin.

She spotted Mason just as he climbed into the pickup truck that was the ranch's only other transportation.

"Mason!" she called.

As he turned and faced her, she leaped down out of the water truck's high cab. Even across the dusty yard she could see a smile send creases through his leathery face as he watched her. Beneath his worn Stetson, his collar-length, fine silvery hair stirred in the wind.

"You're back early," he said. "I left you some lemonade."

"How about ice?"

Even as she asked the question, she tried not to smile. She knew that the old man loved ice, and he hated refilling ice trays the way a cat hates mud. When she was gone all day, she usually returned to an empty freezer, a jumble of ice trays in the sink, and an embarrassed smile on Mason's lined face.

He tried to look offended and failed entirely. He chuckled. "You know me too good, gal."

"After all these years, I should hope so."

Slipping her arm through his, she led him into the relative coolness of the kitchen. Two years ago, when

she had come back to the ranch to live full-time, she had taken some of the money she earned modeling hosiery and transformed the worn kitchen into a bright center of ranch life.

In January and February, when the long winds blew from the north, she and Mason played cribbage on the old oak table. As they played, she coaxed stories out of him, the lives of his father and uncles, grandfathers and great-uncles and great-grandfathers, the women they married, the children who died young and the ones who survived, the people who built and the people who destroyed.

The living history was shared with her in the gravelly, wry words of a man almost three times her age, a man whose ancestors had known the best and the worst the West could deliver. It was her own history, too, for Mason's family had worked alongside her mother's family in the Valley of the Sun for more than a hundred years.

Yet the ranch's beauty and history had never touched Hope's mother. She had hated the Valley of the Sun, had cursed its tawny heights and shadowed canyons with a depth of bitterness that had once terrified her younger daughter.

"Have you ever heard of a man called Rio?" Hope asked quickly. She didn't want to remember her mother, a woman who had loved and hated as deeply as anyone Hope had ever known.

"Big man, easy-moving, kind of an Indian look to him?"

"Ummm," she agreed. "With a smile that makes you believe in life everlasting."

Mason shot her a sideways glance. "Musta took a liking to you. Rio don't smile much."

"He was probably laughing at me," she said, remembering Rio's comments about dreamers and gamblers.

"Doubt it."

"He don't laugh much?" she suggested, imitating Mason's ungrammatical drawl.

"Good thing you got them pigtails cut, or I'd be pulling 'em sure as hell." Mason's smile faded as he reversed an old wooden kitchen chair and braced his arms across the back of it. "Rio don't laugh at nobody but fools. You may be stubborn as flint, but you ain't no fool."

She squeezed the old man's shoulder affectionately. Beneath her fingers he felt like a handful of rawhide braid. Age hadn't stooped him, or even slowed him very much. Except for the occasional arthritis in his hands, Mason was still nearly six feet of "hard times and bad water," as her father had once described his foreman, mentor, and best friend.

The refrigerator made a cool, companionable sound as she opened and shut it. She carried her glass of lemonade—no ice—to the table and sat down.

"What does Rio do?" she asked.

"Breaks horses."

Hope tried to match Mason's laconic description to the complex reality of the man called Rio. "Is that all?"

"If you're Rio, it's a good plenty. He's part horse hisself. Swear to it. Ride anything that grows hair. Gentle about it, too." Mason stretched his arms over

his head with a force that made ligaments and joints shift and pop quietly. "Never knew him to bloody a horse, and he's rode more than one that had it coming."

Hope took a sip of the fresh, tart drink and sighed. "He said he was a man who found water. He said to ask you and then decide."

Though Hope wasn't looking, she sensed Mason's sudden and complete attention. Faded green eyes fastened on her with an intensity that somehow reminded her of Rio.

"He liked something about you," Mason said flatly. Then, seeing her tighten, he added, "Nope, not like that. Oh, you're plenty of woman and he's sure enough a hell of a man, but that won't saddle no broncs for Rio. If he said he'd look for water, it's because you did something he liked."

"He was at Turner's well. All I did was wrestle with that mulish generator."

Mason looked at Hope. The coltish girl of his memories had grown into a woman as beautiful as her mother had been. But unlike her mother, Hope didn't care about her own beauty. Nor did she hate the ranch. She was part of it, as deeply rooted in the land as the plants that tapped hidden water far below the desert floor.

Like her older sister, Hope had tousled dark hair and a generous smile that set men to dreaming. But Hope didn't see it, nor the men she drew. All she saw was the land, and she was willing to work for what she saw. Her sister hadn't been. Julie had been as pretty as a butterfly—and as useless when there was work to be

done. As for Hope's mother, she simply hated the land too much to work it well.

"Rio liked your grit," Mason said, nodding to himself. "That's the only thing he respects. Grit."

"Well, I've plenty of that," she said, deliberately misunderstanding as she wiped her dusty face with the back of her equally dusty arm. "Can he do it?"

Mason's eyes narrowed and looked inward. "Honey, if there's water anywhere on the ranch, Rio will find it."

"How?"

The old man shrugged. "I heard it said he's a water witcher, a dowser, grandson of a Zuni shaman. I heard he was a soldier and a mapmaker. I heard he was raised in a Houston skyscraper and on an Indian reservation beyond the Perdidas. I heard he was educated east of the Rockies and knows the West better than any man alive."

"How much of that do you believe?" Hope asked curiously.

Mason lifted his battered, sweat-stained Stetson and settled it more firmly on his head. "All of it. And I'll tell you this," he added, pinning her with a shrewd green glance. "Rio's smart and quiet and faster than any rattler God ever made. He's part Indian and all man. He don't push worth a damn, and he's pure hell in a fight. I once saw him take apart three yahoos in less time than I could pour a cup of coffee."

"You make him sound—brutal."

Mason was eyeing Hope's lemonade when he sorted out what she hadn't quite said.

"Like Turner?" he asked bluntly.

She let out a breath. "Yes."

"Not a chance. Turner's bone-deep mean. He likes hurting people."

With difficulty Hope concealed a shudder. She knew that part of Turner's personality all too well.

"Rio's easygoing when easy gets it done, and no meaner than he has to be the rest of the time." Mason rubbed his aching knuckles and looked at her. "Honey, two of those three men Rio whipped had knives. There was a lot of loose talk about how they was going to skin out the breed that thought he was good enough to drink with white folks. Whatever those men got, they had coming, and then some."

She turned her head quickly, catching the hard look on Mason's face. "You really like Rio, don't you?"

"If God had seen fit to give Hazel and me kids," Mason said evenly, "I'd have died proud to sire a son like Rio."

For a minute Hope couldn't find any words to say. She had never heard Mason talk about anyone as he did Rio, not even the near-mythical figures out of his family's past.

"Where did you meet Rio?" she asked finally.

Mason hesitated. He lifted his hat again, settled it with a jerk, and said, "It's Hazel's story, really, but she wouldn't mind me telling you. Her sister's kids was in trouble, never mind what kind. Rio sorted it out."

Hope thought quickly, remembering what she knew about Mason's dead wife. Hazel's sister had married a half-Indian drifter. The man had vanished after a few years, leaving four children behind. Part-Indian chil-

dren. It shouldn't have mattered—but there were still a lot of places where it did.

And Rio had “taken apart” three men who hated Indians.

“I see,” Hope murmured. Then, quietly, “I hope those men learned a lesson.”

“Doubt it. Can't teach a snake to ice-skate. But you can set your watch by this,” he added with grim satisfaction. “Them three don't beat up on kids no more.”

Hope decided that she knew all she needed to about the man called Rio: Mason respected him. Whether or not Rio could find water, at least he wasn't a vulture hoping to pick at the bones of her dreams.

“Thanks.” She stood up suddenly and kissed his gray-stubbled cheek.

“You gonna do it?” he asked.

“Yes.” She started for the phone, then stopped in dismay. “I don't know how to get hold of him.”

“Don't worry.” Mason smiled. “You turn around, he'll be there.”

“But how will he know I want to hire him?”

“Same way the wind knows to blow.”

Hope made an impatient sound.

Mason looked up, green eyes calm and certain. “He's Rio. He'll know.”

Three



HOPE PUT HER hands on her hips and made an exasperated sound. “ ‘He’s Rio. He’ll know,’ ” she repeated mockingly. “Big help, Mason.”

Mason just looked at her with wise green eyes.

“If you had pigtails,” she muttered, “I’d pull them right off your stubborn head. I don’t have time to wait for Rio to mysteriously *know* I want to hire him. I need water and I need it now!”

“You always were a headlong sort of gal,” Mason agreed, smiling to himself. “I might be able to find Rio, for a price.”

“What price?” Then she groaned, thinking of the list of chores that had to be done, chores that they both disliked doing.

“Ice cubes for a week,” he said.

“Done.” She smiled wickedly. “You’re slipping, Mason. I always do the ice cubes.”

“Yeah, but now I won’t feel bad about it.”

She laughed and shook her head, making light burn darkly through her loose curls. "How will you find Rio?"

"Easy. He's breaking horses for Turner."

"Oh."

Hope bit back a curse. She really didn't want to call the Turner ranch. Since she had come back to the Valley of the Sun to live, John Turner had pursued her relentlessly. The more often she refused him, the more determined he was to have her.

Grimly she nerved herself up for the call she had to make. Though she had outgrown her terror of him, she still despised him for his casual brutality. Just being polite to him was an effort that left her jaw aching. She hid her feelings because she knew that they would only make him more insistent. His arrogance had to be experienced to be believed.

"Has that son of— Has he been bothering you again?" Mason asked, his voice rough.

She shrugged. "Ever since his aunt's bank gave me a second mortgage on the Valley of the Sun, John seems to think he owns me."

"I may be near seventy, but so help me God, I'll pistol-whip that son of a bitch if he ever touches you again."

Hope put her hand on Mason's arm, both restraining and reassuring him. Even while her father was still alive, Mason had protected her as though she was his own daughter. In many ways he was an old-fashioned western man. He believed that if a woman said *no*, she meant it, and that was the end of the matter.

It was a belief John Turner didn't share. Like a spoiled child, he was obsessed by whatever he couldn't have. His father had prevented him from taking Hope eight years ago, but Big Jase Turner had died last winter, leaving no one to put a leash on his only son.

With a reflex that came from many years of practice, she buried the thought of the Turners and her father's futile dreams of a "good" marriage for his younger daughter. It had all happened a lifetime ago. Both fathers were dead, Hope's mother was dead, her sister was dead.

Hope was alive.

In surviving, she had learned the difference between a man's easy promises and the terrifying reality of his lust. But more important than yesterday and lies and a young girl's screams, today Hope was a woman whose ranch was dying beneath her feet. Next to that fact nothing mattered, certainly not the irretrievable past.

She picked up the receiver and dialed quickly. The housekeeper answered the phone on the second ring.

"Hi, Sally, this is Hope. I'd like to leave a message for one of your hands."

"I'll get John," Sally said quickly.

"No, there's no need to bother him."

It was useless. Sally was already gone. Hope closed her eyes and waited for the lord and master of the Turner empire to come to the phone.

Mason's eyes narrowed as he watched a mask settle over Hope's face. It had almost broken his heart when he had seen her dropped off by Jase Turner nearly eight years ago. Her face had been pale, bruised, and her ex-

pression far too old to belong to a laughing girl who had just turned eighteen.

Sighing, cursing under his breath, Mason rubbed his neck wearily. Thinking about the past always made him feel old and futile. The only good things about those years were Hazel and Hope's father, Wayne, and they were both dead now. And Hope, of course. She had come out of the past and she was alive. To hear her laughter on a winter morning made everything worth it. He would do whatever it took to make certain that she would never again forget how to laugh.

"Hello, John," Hope said neutrally. "I told Sally not to bother you."

"It's never a bother talking to you, baby doll."

"I'd like to leave a message for one of your hands. A man called Rio."

There was a fractional pause. When Turner spoke again, his voice wasn't nearly so warm. "What do you want with him?"

She waited for a long moment, letting the rude question echo, before she said crisply, "Sorry to disturb you. Good-bye."

"Wait! Don't be so stiff-necked. I'm just looking out for your interests. You can't trust every man, you know."

Hope thought of water and thirsty cattle and held her tongue. Turner's arrogance and rocklike insensitivity shouldn't surprise her anymore.

"This Rio is a drifter and a cocksman," Turner said baldly.

"I'm a big girl. I can take care of myself."

Now.

Neither of them said the word, but it was there between them. Hope hadn't been able to hold her own with a man when she was eighteen, but she could now. For that, she could thank John Turner. For that, she once had wished him and herself dead.

The thought almost made her smile now. It was hard to believe that she had ever been so young and naive.

"I thought you and Mason broke all your horses on your own," Turner said. "The ones you have left, that is. If you'd just give me the word, baby doll, I'd have you three deep in the best horses money can buy. And if it's Storm Walker that's giving you trouble, I'll be glad to put the spurs to him myself. He's too damn much horse for a woman."

With a grimace Hope schooled her voice to show nothing. When she spoke, she ignored his repeated proposal to become Mrs. John Turner. She also ignored his casual reminder that she had only five horses left, and one of them was a stallion that was a double handful of thunder to ride.

"If you see Rio, tell him I called," she said.

"He won't be in for several hours, maybe not for days. He's an independent bastard. You better tell me what you have in mind. He'll want to know what—"

"He already does," Hope cut in.

"Wait. Are you coming to the barbecue tomorrow?"

It was an effort to keep her voice civil, but she managed. She needed his water too badly to give way to her temper. "Sorry. There's just too much to do here."

"Baby doll, you're working that pretty ass to the

bone. You don't have to. I'll take care of you. I want to. You can keep your ranch. Hell, I'll even pipe water over for you. It'd be my wedding present to—"

"Thanks for passing on my message," Hope interrupted firmly, stopping the flow of unwanted words.

Turner laughed. "All right. But you're going to say yes one of these days."

Silently she hung up and turned to face Mason's knowing eyes.

"Still after you, huh?" the old man asked.

"It's just a game with him. If I said yes, he'd take off in the opposite direction like a chaparral cock."

Mason shook his head slowly. "Don't you believe it."

Her smile was small and tight. "I don't. But in a way, it's true all the same. If he had me, he wouldn't want me for more than a week or two. That's just the way he is. He's always been that way. He'll die like that."

"Yeah, and he'll die considerable before his time if he tries more than sweet-talking you."

Sudden tears burned behind Hope's eyes. She wrapped her arms around Mason. "I don't know what I'd have done without you," she whispered, hugging him hard. "I love you."

His large-knuckled hand smoothed her hair while he returned her hug. "You'd have been buried in ice cubes, that's what." Then, almost too softly for her to hear, he said, "I love you, honey." Then he turned her in his arms, swatted her paternally on her rear, and said, "Now, you git before them cows dry up and blow clean to the Perdidas."

"If Rio calls—"

"Gal, you ain't been listenin' to me," Mason interrupted impatiently. "Rio will find you. He don't need no help from me, and he sure don't need no swaggering, yellow-bellied son of a bitch like Turner to point the way."

Hope gave up. She gulped a fast swallow of lemonade and left Mason to enjoy the spoils of her hasty exit.

He took the glass, emptied it, and called after her from the porch, "Beans and beef at sundown."

"And salad," she yelled as she climbed into Behemoth's dusty cab. "There's lettuce, tomatoes, green onions, and mushrooms in the refrigerator."

"Rabbit food! You expect me to fix rab—"

The rest of his outraged words were lost in the roar of Behemoth's engine. It was no accident. Hope knew that while Mason might occasionally eat, and enjoy, "rabbit food," he felt it was beneath him actually to prepare it.

He would do it, though, cursing every crisp leaf. And he would enjoy it, both the crisp leaves and the cursing. The ride to town was long, which meant that fresh vegetables were rare at the ranch house.

Smiling, Hope drove past the home pasture where her breeding cattle clustered around the trough, their black coats dulled by dust. Alongside the dirt road there was a narrow pipeline pitted by sand and sun. The well that had once supplied the ranch house's needs had gone dry more than a quarter of a century ago. Her father had drilled the well deeper and then deeper still, until he struck dense bedrock where earth-

quakes had taken water-bearing layers of rock and shoved them beneath bone-dry slate. He had cursed and dug another well several miles away, on the far side of the buried fault.

The new well shared Hope's name. It was water from the Hope that had been piped down to the ranch house and its outbuildings.

Other, separate wells once had irrigated the nearby pastures and filled the cattle troughs to overflowing. No more, though. The fields were dead and the windmill-driven pumps that had once brought up water were disconnected, lifeless. The water that came out of the wells now wasn't enough to keep the prime on the pumps, much less supply the needs of the black Angus, the croplands, and the scattered troughs of the range cattle.

The well her father had named Hope wasn't dry. Not quite. But it couldn't produce enough water for cattle and the ranch house, too. So she had capped the pipe leading from the Hope to the ranch house, sold off some of the range cattle at a loss, and started hauling water to troughs both at the ranch and farther away.

When even that hadn't been enough, she had culled more range cattle, selling off pieces of her future in order to survive the endless dry months.

The croplands and ranch-house lawns were long dead, as were all but the oldest, most deeply rooted trees surrounding the buildings. She had been forced to let the vegetable gardens beyond the kitchen die, for she couldn't feed the plants' thirst and that of her cattle, too. She hauled water for the house from Turner's

wells and fed it into the cistern buried beneath the ranch yard.

And still it wasn't enough.

Each day her ranch's single remaining well sent a little less water up to the thirsty surface of the ground. Each day the cattle needed a little bit more to drink. Each day dawned clear and bright in a barren sky.

It will rain soon, she vowed quietly.

Every drought, even the worst, had an end. All she had to do was survive until the rains came and the temporary water holes filled and the groundwater rose up again to fill the empty wells. Then grass would grow, cattle would breed and fatten and increase in number and size, and the Valley of the Sun would live again.

With the money she had saved from her modeling career, she could manage for another year. With luck, even longer. She could meet the balloon payment on the second mortgage that was due on January fifteenth. She could keep the ranch out of bankruptcy even longer if she took the money she had set aside for drilling a new well and used the funds to meet the ranch's monthly expenses.

But if she used up the well money, the ranch itself was doomed. The rains simply didn't come as they had a century ago, fifty years ago, even thirty years ago. Without a new well, a new source of year-round water, the Valley of the Sun would be virtually worthless for ranching.

With hungry eyes Hope looked at the tawny country flexed against the endless fall of sunlight. Big sage lifted its shaggy gray limbs overhead, making graceful,

mysterious patterns against the blue bowl of the sky. Shadow creases of ravines outlined the muscular land as it rumbled up to meet the heights of the Perdidas to the east. Plants in subdued shades of green and bronze grew on the broad alluvial fans that swept out from the base of the mountains.

After a good storm, when runoff streams tumbled down into the low basins, there were temporary lakes where migratory birds flocked and wary desert animals left delicate, braided trails along the soft shorelines. In the winter the alluvial fans were green with grass and new growth, and bright with the streams that ran dry during the hot weeks of summer.

But now, too often, those same streams were dry longer each year, until ravines and pools that had once watered range cattle no longer even grew grass. That was when ranches drank deeply from their wells.

That was when wells failed.

The resinous, tangy smell of the high desert poured through the truck's open window. Hope breathed in deeply, letting the clean scent of the land revive her. The sun coming through the windshield was hot, though not nearly as hot as it had been three months ago.

But even then, even when the ranch baked beneath a brutal sun, Hope loved the land. The searing days only made the brief twilight more silky, and the nights were like drinking dark wine from an immense crystal chalice. There was no other place like the Valley of the Sun for her. Anywhere. She knew it as certainly as she knew her own name.

Hope turned off the ranch road onto a track that was little more than twin ruts. In the rainy season the ruts would soften, run like sticky wax, and then, for a short time, freeze in the cold northern winds. But by then it wouldn't matter if the road was impassable. In the season of winter rains and ice she wouldn't have to haul water to the widely scattered troughs.

Behemoth lurched and veered sideways like a hammerheaded horse determined to go back to the barn. Hope yanked the wheel and hung on until the truck was lined up with the road again. The ache in her shoulders told her that it was going to be all she could do to drag down the heavy canvas hose, connect it, and pull it to the dry steel trough through the milling, thrusting, thirsty cattle. Yet it had to be done at least once more today.

It should be done twice.

Hope didn't let herself think about it. Under her relentless grip the truck bounced over the top of a small rise and toward her namesake well.

Rio was there, waiting.

Four



HOPE BRAKED IN a turmoil of dust and crept toward the empty trough. Scenting Behemoth's cargo of water, cattle bawled and swarmed around the truck, making it impossible for her to get closer to the trough.

Without a word Rio swung into the saddle and went to work on the cattle, herding them aside. His mare worked neatly, precisely, gracefully, spinning on her haunches, turning cattle away from the truck with a well-trained cow pony's lack of fuss. Her rider was just as skillful. He rode the swiftly pivoting mare deftly, balancing his weight to ease the mare's work. The horse's motion swept through him, repeated in supple movements of his spine.

Thanks to Rio and his quick pony, Hope was able to park the truck right next to the empty circular tank. The trough was big, the size of a backyard swimming pool. Still inside the cab, she peered down into the tank.

It was empty.

She listened for the generator and heard only Behe-moth's engine muttering. Her heart hesitated, then sank. The generator's cutoff switch must have tripped. That meant there wasn't enough water moving through the pump. The windmill itself was turning, but all it could bring up was a stream of water barely as wide as her little finger. As soon as the water fell from the cast-iron pipe into the trough, cattle sucked up every bit of moisture.

Hope watched a cow's big pink tongue lick at the damp metal. Ice settled in her stomach. The well her ranch depended on was all but dry.

The exhaustion she had been keeping at bay closed over her. She shut her eyes for a few seconds and fought against numbing fear. *She couldn't lose the ranch.*

Determination rose in her, pushing away fear and despair. The cab door rattled and slammed as she leaped down to the ground on the side away from the empty tank. She avoided the milling cattle easily. They wanted water, not her.

She glanced over the herd as she moved, automatically checking their condition with an experienced eye. The Herefords were lean and hard. Too lean. Too hard. They should have been sleek and placid, like Turner's cattle. But her range cattle had to search several miles beyond the well for their food and then walk back to the tank for water. Each day they had to go a bit farther to satisfy their hunger, and then a bit farther back to satisfy their thirst.

There was nothing she could do about the lack of natural feed except pray for rain. That, and make sure that her cattle had water to come back to. She knelt under Behemoth's metal belly and went to work, swearing silently as she fought to connect the slightly warped, definitely corroded coupling to the valve. Her arms shook and her shoulders cramped, warning her that she was close to the end of her strength.

There was a slight movement behind her, a brush of fabric along her thigh, and then Rio was beside her, lifting the hose from her straining hands. Gratefully she dropped her arms and watched him wrestle with the stubborn coupling.

"One of the threads is bent," she said as he tried to find a way to screw the hose on. "There's a trick to threading it. If you'll hold the hose up for me, I'll do the rest."

Before she finished talking, he moved the hose so that its brass coupling was just short of the valve's dark mouth. She reached through his arms to make the threads of valve and hose match. Without the weight of the wet hose dragging the end down, it was much easier. After a few false starts she succeeded in screwing the hose on enough so that she didn't have to hold the brass together with one hand and turn with the other.

Unconsciously she took a deep breath, bracing herself for the job of tightening the mulish coupling so that it wouldn't blow apart at the first pressure of water rushing through.

Rio felt Hope's deep breath in the stir of her breasts against his arm. When he glanced at her, he realized

that she wasn't aware of the intimacy. She was focused on the stubborn coupling with the kind of intensity that came only from a combination of exhaustion and fear.

For the first time he noticed the marks that sweat had made on her face, the dusting of grit and the flush of heat, and her tempting, fine-grained skin. Strands of hair licked down from her hat and swayed across her face like dark flames. Her hazel eyes showed almost none of the green that had been visible in the pouring sun by Turner's well. Now her eyes were dark, too dark, just as her lips were too pale against her flushed cheeks.

Rio wondered how many times she had made the trip from Turner's well to her own dry land and thirsty livestock. She must be exhausted. Gently he covered her hands with his. Easing her fingers aside, he went to work tightening the coupling.

He was surprised at how difficult it was to keep the threads turning delicately and at the same time prevent the weight of the hose from jamming the two pieces of brass together at the wrong angle. The thought of Hope trying and failing and trying again and again to make the coupling work brought a hard line to Rio's mouth.

Where the hell is Mason? he asked himself silently. *This is no job for a woman's arms. How long has Hope been making these water runs by herself?*

"Thanks, that should do it," she said, pulling herself out from under the truck. "I'll get the wrench."

She came back very quickly. In her hand was a plumber's wrench as long as her arm and a lot heavier. Rio took the wrench from her, lifting it with an ease

that she envied and that he took for granted. She watched his faded blue shirt strain rhythmically across his shoulders and biceps. He tightened the coupling with smooth, powerful motions of his arms. She waited, judging her moment, then began to tug at the hose, straightening it for the rush of water that would come soon.

"Stay put," he said. "I'll take care of it."

Her arms decided before her mind did. They dropped to her sides. She sighed and sat down, resting the back of her head against Behemoth's curved metal belly. Quietly she watched the desert-tanned man who was crouched so close to her that the faded jeans and shirts they both wore were almost impossible to tell apart. As he worked, she enjoyed the complex play of human muscle and tendon in the same way she had enjoyed watching his gray mare handle the impatient cows.

"Thanks," she said, rubbing her tired arms. "I owe you one."

Rio shook his head slowly. He was remembering Hope's beauty when she arched against the sky and her hands sprayed liquid diamonds over her beautifully curved body. It was an image he couldn't get out of his mind. She had been as vivid and unexpected as a rainbow in the desert.

And like a rainbow, she had given pleasure and asked nothing in return.

"No," he said quietly, "you don't owe me a thing."

She turned her head toward him, but he didn't look back at her. All his attention was for the stubborn cou-

pling. When he finally finished, he slid out from beneath the truck and propped the wrench against a tire. Without a word he began dragging the heavy, stiff hose off its rack and into the trough.

Cattle bawled and shoved and crowded around the water tank. Though they kept trying, they couldn't quite wedge themselves between the truck and the trough. Rio and Hope wouldn't be trampled as long as they kept to Behemoth's bulky shelter.

He pitched his voice to carry over the noise of the cattle. "Ready."

When Hope didn't answer, and the hose remained slack, he glanced over his shoulder. She was propped against the dusty truck, eyes closed, soaking in every instant of rest like dry sand absorbing water. Contrasted with the truck's bulk, she looked very small, almost fragile.

"Hope?"

She opened her eyes and smiled up at him. With a grace that belied the exhausted shadows beneath her eyes, she picked up the heavy wrench, fastened it to the valve, and put her whole body into giving it a good solid turn.

Water swelled the hose and rushed over the lip of the tank, thundering hard and fast into the empty trough. Cattle bawled and crowded closer, jostling even the sturdy truck. When Rio was certain that the hose wouldn't leap up out of the trough and spray water everywhere, he slipped back under the ancient army vehicle and sat next to Hope.

"Eager little devils," he said, watching the forest of dusty legs milling beyond the truck's shelter.

"Beautiful little devils." Hope was smiling and her eyes were alight with pride in her cattle.

After a time the animals that had been first at the water tank allowed themselves to be pushed aside by their thirsty friends. The cattle that had shoved in for a drink earlier in the day, during Behemoth's first water run, waited on the fringes of the herd or grazed invisibly among the big sage and scattered piñon that grew over the gently folded land. The grazing cattle were the same ones that would be most eager tomorrow, up in the front of the crowd, shoving and bawling for their first taste of water in a day.

Hope didn't waste energy trying to talk over the noise of her cows. With a half-apologetic smile to Rio, she lay on her back in the dust, her head on her hat, her eyes closed. She felt light-headed with the pleasure of stretching muscles that were cramped from the day's demands.

This was one of the moments she waited for, when the hardest part of water hauling had been done and all that remained was uncoupling the hose, racking it, and driving Behemoth back to the ranch house. Sometimes before she left for home she would take off her clothes and slide over the lip of the huge tank. She would paddle quietly for a time before she rested her arms along the rim and floated, watching while glittering stars bloomed in the navy-blue depths of evening.

With an odd smile Rio watched Hope as she lay unself-consciously near him. He didn't know whether she was too tired for the usual flirtations or forthright advances of the women he had known in the past, or

whether she simply didn't see him as a man because he wasn't all white.

Then he remembered the times he had turned and found her watching him, female approval clear in her expression. She was exhausted, not bigoted.

He was tempted to stretch out next to her, sharing the truck's bluntly curving shelter and resting his body at the same time. His day had begun well before dawn, when he had caught Dusk, saddled her, and rounded up some of Turner's skittish Thoroughbreds. The horses were as elegant as ballerinas, and about as much use for working cattle.

It was Turner's quarter horses that Rio truly enjoyed. They were muscular, cow-savvy, and quick, perfectly suited to use with cattle. By the time he was done, John Turner would have some of the best cow horses in Nevada.

Then Turner would ruin his quarter horses trying to win flashy buckles in rodeos. The man had no more sense of how to treat a horse than he did of how to treat hired hands, women, or the land itself. He took, but didn't give back. He didn't even suspect that he should.

Slouching farther down, Rio propped his head against a dusty tire and drew his feet out of the way of the eager cattle. He could have slept, but didn't. Instead he savored the peace of the moment, the cattle's thirst being slaked, the woman resting only inches from his thigh, the tactile memory of her breasts brushing against his arm.

With a silent curse he told himself what kind of fool he was even to look at Hope. *She's not a woman for*

bed today and good-bye tomorrow. So stop thinking about the way she looked outlined against the sky with her blouse shaping her the way I'd like to.

Even if she came to me, asking for me, I'd only hurt her. Is that what I want? Do I want to give her a hand when she's down and needs me and then drag her off to bed like she's just one more Saturday night?

Hell, I outgrew that kind of screwing before I was old enough to drink.

Grimly Rio listened to his internal lecture. He approved each point with his intelligence and at the same time fought against them with every one of his fully alive senses. But despite his prowling masculine hunger, he made no move toward Hope.

Not a word. Not a gesture. Not even a hungry look.

Instinctively he knew beyond doubt or argument that she wouldn't give herself casually to any man. He also knew just as deeply that he didn't give himself at all to any woman, not really, not in any way that mattered. In the last thirty-three years he had learned many things about himself. One of them was that Brother-to-the-wind was more than his Indian name. It was his fate, and he had finally accepted it.

He had spent his life searching for something that was more powerful, more enduring, more beautiful, more compelling, than the endless sweep of the western lands. He had found no place, no person, capable of holding him when his brother the wind called to him, whispering of secret springs and shaded canyons where men never walked.

The other thing that Rio had learned about himself

on the way to growing up was that while he was born white, raised white until he was twelve, and educated white after sixteen, white women didn't want him. Not all of him. They didn't want his silences or his uncanny insights into life and the land.

Most of all, white women didn't want to have a child that was less white than they were.

He didn't really blame them. After what he had been through, he could write a book about being not white, not being Indian, not being anything to anyone but a pain in the butt.

Rio pulled his hat down over his eyes, shutting out the sight of Hope's vulnerable body within reach of his hungry hands. He subdued his desire with the same steel discipline that had kept his raging temper under control when he was growing up and blonde kids had baited him, calling him *breed* and *blankethead*. He had fought his tormentors with icy ferocity, but he hadn't killed any of them.

And he could have, even then.

When he was grown, most of the men who backed him into a corner depended on numbers or various weapons to make them strong. Rio had learned never to depend on anyone or anything but himself. It gave him an advantage in sheer ruthlessness that at first surprised and then overwhelmed his opponents.

It also made him very much a man alone. He had accepted that, too. *Brother-to-the-wind*.

Cattle milled and pushed, raising a dust that made the air a shimmering brass color. Water rushed out of Behemoth, thundering into the stock tank with a cool

sound. The smells of cattle, water, and dust merged with those of sunlight, piñon, and sage.

The mixture of odors was soothing to Hope, familiar, reassuring. She sighed and relaxed even more. Exhaustion washed over her in waves, making her dizzy. She realized that she was on the edge of falling asleep miles from home while a big stranger half-lay nearby, so close to her that she could sense each stirring of his body as he breathed.

Yet she wasn't worried. Since her eighteenth birthday she had learned quite a bit about people in general and men in particular. Rio didn't give out the signals of a man who would leap on the first woman he found alone and unprotected. He had looked at her with veiled male appreciation, but he hadn't crowded her in any way.

Even if she hadn't been sure of her own instincts, she trusted those of Mason Graves. Any man he would be proud to claim for a son wouldn't be the kind of man to take advantage of people weaker than he was.

Hope's only regret about her present situation was that she didn't know Rio well enough to use his shoulder as a pillow rather than the dry, unforgiving ground. The thought of curling up against his living strength made her smile.

She was still smiling when she fell headlong into sleep.

Rio watched Hope for a long time, repeating to himself all the ways he was wrong for her and she was wrong for him. Then he lay down beside her and eased her head off the hard ground and onto his shoulder.

She stirred vaguely but didn't pull away. Instead she moved even closer, sighed, and relaxed against his body with a trust that made him want to shake her awake and tell her what fools they both were being.

Trying not to think at all, Rio lay utterly still, caught in the gentle, bittersweet pleasure of holding a woman in his arms who trusted him more than he trusted himself.

Five



THE SUN BALANCED in crimson glory on the black outline of a distant ridge. Long shadows reached under the battered water truck, dark forerunners of night. The stock tank was more than half-full. Its clean water reflected the last burning light of day.

No cattle milled around the tank. Having drunk their fill, the Herefords were out grazing over the rumpled land. The cattle looked like carved garnet statues set among the nearly black flames of piñon trees.

The elegant gray mare dozed three-legged next to a clump of sage that gleamed a ghostly silver in the rich light. The single roping rein Rio preferred to use hung loosely around her neck, allowing her freedom to wander as she pleased. She needed no physical tie, for she was held by invisible bonds of training and her affection for the man who lay quietly beneath the old water truck.

Rio looked from the thick, dark lashes lying along

Hope's cheek to the stunning transformations of sunset in a wild land. He had known many such times, days inevitably changed by condensing darkness, cool scented winds sweeping down from water-rich heights. Yet he had never known a sunset just like this one.

In the past he had been alone with the land, and now a woman lay in his arms as quietly as sunlight in a hollow.

It was a strange sensation to hold Hope, pleasure laced with uneasiness, as though he was a trespasser in an intriguing, forbidden land. He wondered if his Swedish grandmother had felt this way when she lay with her Indian lover, a Zuni shaman whose very existence was an affront to the Christianity that she had come to teach on the reservation.

The mare snorted and stamped her front foot, discouraging a persistent fly. It was the only sound Rio could hear. Even the wind was quiet.

Cool velvet shadows lapped over his feet. He knew it was past time for him to awaken the woman sleeping in his arms. He should have done it at least a half hour ago, when the hose had finished transferring the last of its water to the trough.

Reluctantly, gently, he shifted Hope's head back onto her hat. She made a protesting sound. He brushed his lips over her hair, breathed in the fragrance of land and woman and earth, and then leaned against the dusty tire once more, no longer touching her.

"Hope," he said softly.

She didn't stir.

He allowed his hand to rest on her shoulder, to

stroke it, to feel the woman-heat beneath the faded, dusty cotton. The temptation to slide his fingers into the shadowed opening of her collar swept over him, shaking him with its intensity. He wanted to touch the sweet curves of her breasts, to follow his hands with his mouth, to unwrap her, to take her right there, with the night blooming around them in a thousand luminous shades of darkness.

"Hope." The word was rough, almost painful, as though it had been dragged unwillingly from his throat.

She woke in a rush, disoriented.

He had been expecting it. He held her shoulder down so that she couldn't sit up before she was fully awake. His hand was all that saved her from cracking her head on Behemoth's metal belly in the first heedless instant of waking up.

Her eyes opened dark amber, a color as clear and pure as the evening itself. For a moment she was embarrassed; then she smiled crookedly, accepting the fact that she had fallen asleep on the most interesting man she had met in her life.

"Did my snoring keep you awake?" she asked wryly.

Rio had seen both the instant of unease and her humorous acceptance of reality. His smile transformed his face the way moonrise transforms night. Lines that had been harsh became gentle, and angles that had been forbidding became merely strong.

"Sorry to disappoint you," he said, "but you didn't snore even once."

"Must have been your lucky day," she said, stretching luxuriously. "God, I didn't know the ground could be such a soft mattress."

"It was," he said, referring to her first comment about luck. "It isn't," he added, referring to the softness of the ground.

She blinked and shook her head. Before she could ask for an explanation, Rio stood and went over to his horse. He led the mare to the tank and watched while she plunged her muzzle into the clean water.

After a few moments Hope stood, dusted off her jeans with her palms, and walked over to Rio. She would have given a lot for the freedom to peel off her clothes and float for just a few moments in the cool water. With a small sigh she turned away from the tempting liquid.

"The only water this tank will ever see is Turner water," Rio said, watching his mare drink. Then he turned quickly, catching the despair on Hope's face as his words sank in. "If you want me to drill here, forget it. It would be a waste of my time, your money, and your cows' lives."

Silently Hope counted the rings expanding through the water as the horse drank. It wasn't that Rio's words were untrue or even unexpected. But they were so very final.

It was the end of her dreams spoken in a stranger's calm, certain voice.

She wanted to protest, to ask Rio how he could be so sure, but she didn't. In the quiet, deep center of herself she didn't doubt him. She sensed that he knew the land in a way that couldn't be described or wholly under-

stood. It had to be accepted on trust, the same way she trusted the sun to rise in the morning and stars to come in the evening.

Hope fought against the useless tears closing her throat. She felt defenseless, neither truly asleep nor yet awake, suspended between the end of one dream and the beginning of an unwelcome awakening.

She had enough money to drill her namesake well deeper. She didn't have the resources to find and drill an entirely new, probably much deeper well from scratch. She didn't realize how much she had secretly counted on being able to revive the Hope until now, when she finally and fully accepted the fact that her well was dead.

The despair was numbing.

"Hope—"

"It's all right," she said huskily, interrupting him. She knew that Rio hadn't meant to hurt her with his blunt assessment of her dream. "I understand."

He wondered if she truly did. Then he cursed himself for his unforgiving description of her well. Yet as long as she held on to an unrealistic dream, there would be no way to give her one that had at least a fighting chance of coming true.

And that was what she had asked him for. A fighting chance.

"I hoped that if I just drilled farther down, through the bedrock, I'd strike artesian water," she said in a low voice. Then, slipping through her defenses, came the dying cries of her dream. "Are you sure? How can you be so sure?"

"Yes. I'm sure."

Silently Rio watched her with eyes as deep and clear as the water she had hoped to find. He was sure. But he couldn't explain his certainty to Hope. It was a combination of instinct and education and long experience in dry lands.

"Well," she said, her voice steady despite its unusual huskiness, "thanks for being honest with me. You could have cleaned out my drilling account and then walked away."

"Is that what you heard about me?" Rio's tone was distant, hard.

She shook her head, making her hair shift and shimmer darkly in the dying light. "No. And even if I had," she added, meeting his eyes directly, "I wouldn't have believed it after being with you. You aren't a liar or a thief."

For a long moment they looked at each other, silently accepting what was being offered. She trusted him not to lie to her. He trusted her to believe him without any proof other than his word.

"If there's water on your land, I'll find it for you," Rio said. His voice was as soft and certain as when he had told her that the Hope well was dead.

She smiled sadly. "Unless the water you find is close to the surface, I can't afford to go after it."

"First let's find the water. Then we'll worry about drilling the well. I'll work nights and weekends here until I'm finished with Turner's horses. Then I'll work full-time."

"I can't afford to—"

"My pay will be room and board for me and my horse," he cut in, knowing what she was going to say.

"That's not enough."

"Do you have any old drilling equipment in your barn?" he asked.

"All the way back to the first well. Why?"

"We'll salvage what we can. I've got some equipment of my own that I'll have shipped in. Between us we'll put together a drilling rig that won't cost you much. Your biggest expense will be pipe, 'mud,' and fuel."

"And your fee," she said firmly. "It isn't fair that you work only for room and board."

His smile gleamed briefly in the dying light. His eyes were even darker now, as mysterious and radiant as the twilight expanding throughout the land. "It isn't fair that you have to do the work of three men just to hang on to your ranch."

She shrugged. There was no help for it, so there was no point in complaining about it.

"You're going to work until rain falls—or you do," he said dryly. "Right?"

His choice of words almost made her smile in spite of the grief of losing an old dream.

"I'm no different from anyone else," she said matter-of-factly. "I do what I can for as long as I can, and I hope to God that it will be enough."

Rio thought of the men and women he had met who had worked as little as they could for as short a time as possible, and bitched every step of the way about bad luck and bad people and the unfairness of a world that

didn't give them everything they had ever wanted. Those were the people Rio avoided.

The other people—the ones like Hope who worked their hearts out for a dream and didn't whine when the going got rough—those were the people Rio was drawn to as inevitably as rain was drawn to the thirsty ground. Those were the people he helped, sharing their dreams for a time, giving what he could, taking only what they could afford in return.

When the dreams changed or came true, he moved on like his brother the wind, speaking only in the wild silences of the land, searching for something that neither he nor the wind could name.

"I'll help you," Rio said softly, "and hope to God that it's enough."

"But I can't afford—" she began.

"I don't want money as payment. If I bring in a well, I'll leave ten mares to be bred to Storm Walker. You'll treat the mares and their foals as your own, no better and no worse. From time to time I'll come to the Valley of the Sun, take the horses I want, and leave the mares to be bred to your best stallion. For as long as the water in my well flows."

When she started to speak, he put his finger on her lips, surprising her into silence. There was sensuality in the touch and something else, something indescribable that made her heart stop and then beat more quickly, more deeply.

"Think carefully before you answer, Hope. Not one of my wells has ever gone dry."

He lifted his hand, freeing her.

She closed her eyes, but still she saw Rio, his sun-darkened skin, his eyes deep and clear as the night. Echoes of his velvet voice moved like a caress over her skin, touching her more deeply than anything ever had, even her dreams.

"Yes," she said, her voice as calm as his eyes. "Ten mares. Storm Walker." Then she looked directly at him. "And more, if you want. Horses, cattle, whatever. I have a lot of land and no water. Yet."

He watched Hope's expression, felt her truth, heard her trust in him, and knew both pleasure and uneasiness. He had taken one dream from her and given her another: water unending, sweet water reviving her dying ranch.

But he couldn't guarantee that the second dream would be any more possible than the first. He could only guarantee that if it *was* possible, he would give it to her.

"Sometimes there's no water to be found anywhere, by anyone." His voice was both quiet and rough.

She smiled wearily. "Yes, I know. If that happens, your mares will still be bred and the foals cared for until I no longer own the Valley of the Sun."

"No well, no payment."

"Your mares will be bred," she repeated, her voice firm. "Ship them in anytime." With a wry twist to her mouth she added, "Storm Walker will thank you for it. This last year I've had to use my four remaining mares for working cattle rather than for breeding."

Rio's smile gleamed in the gathering darkness. He held out his hand. She took it without hesitation, letting the warmth of him seep into her as the last of the

sun's crimson light fled the sky. His touch was a warm, living reality that gave substance to all hopes, all possibilities, everything.

Eyes shining, heart beating rapidly, Hope allowed herself to dream again.

"For as long as the water flows," she said, pressing her hand against his, both clinging to and giving back his touch.

The echo of his own words went through Rio like a wild wind, shaking everything it touched. He wanted to tell Hope not to trust him so much, not to believe in him so deeply.

Yet that wasn't what he wanted to say, not really. She could trust him with her dream of water. Her heart was a different matter. And it was her heart that accelerated at his touch, making her pulse quicken visibly beneath the soft skin of her inner wrist.

And she wasn't even aware of it. He could see that as clearly as he had seen her courage and determination while she worked herself to exhaustion to save her cattle and her ranch from drought. She thought it was the new dream that was stirring her blood and her heart.

He knew that it wasn't, not entirely. The same sensual hunger burned in his own blood as the heat of her skin slid over his.

Rio couldn't draw back from Hope. Her dream was as deep and compelling as she was. That was why he wanted to—why he *must*—help her. He had stopped dreaming long ago. The emptiness that had come with the end of dreams was a void that even the wind couldn't fill.

"When can you start?" Hope asked. She felt oddly breathless, suspended between Rio's male warmth and the intimacy of desert twilight.

"I already have."

"You have? What did you do?"

"I looked at all your wells."

"Oh." Hope said no more.

Neither did Rio. There was nothing more to say. The Valley of the Sun's wells were dead.

She drew in a deep breath. "I see. Since you've already started working, it's past time for me to make good on my promise of room and board. Mason will have dinner waiting by the time we get back. Nothing fancy. Beef, beans, bread, and salad."

Rio's black eyebrows rose. "Salad?"

"Don't tell me," Hope said, groaning. "You're another one of those cowboys who can't stand rabbit food."

Gentle laughter curled around her like a caress, like his voice when he finally spoke. "No problem. I get real hungry for fresh vegetables."

"Good. We'll gang up on Mason and demand our rabbit rights."

Still smiling, Rio pulled the cold hose out of the stock tank and began wrapping the canvas coils around the rack bolted to the end of the truck. Hope helped as much as she could, feeding coils to him. By the time the hose was stowed away, they were both wet and more than a little muddy.

"Feel free to take a dip in the tank before you ride in for dinner," she said as she wiped her hands on her

jeans. "I usually do. It's more fun than a basin bath at the ranch."

He smiled slightly. "Is that like a bucket bath?"

"Nope. Less luxurious. Buckets are bigger than our washbasin. Until I can take time out from watering cows to make another run to Turner's well, that's all there will be at home—a washrag and a basin of water. But," she added, smiling crookedly at him, "the washrag is of the highest quality."

Rio smiled in return, though he would rather have cursed. Obviously the water shortage at the ranch house was little short of desperate; Hope couldn't supply the house and the scattered range cattle at the same time. There simply weren't enough hours in the day or strength in her body to do what had to be done.

Again he wondered what had happened to Mason. It wasn't like him to let a woman work herself raw if he could help her out.

Without a word Rio turned toward his horse and whistled. The rising sound carried as cleanly as a hawk's cry through the silence.

The mare's head came up and she trotted over to Rio. He held the roping rein and looked at Hope.

"Give her a few seconds to get used to your lighter weight," he said. "She's the best night horse you'll ever ride."

"But—" she began.

"I'll take the truck," Rio continued without a pause. "Don't wait dinner for me. I'll be a while."

Automatically Hope's fingers closed over the rein he handed to her. She hesitated, then decided not to ask

the obvious question about where he was going and what he was doing. She either trusted Rio or she didn't. In any case, she wasn't the kind of employer who needed to keep her men under her thumb at all times.

"Reverse gear is really dicey," she said. "Avoid it if you can. If you can't, I wish you luck. You'll need it. You'll have a hell of a time getting into another gear. I once backed ten miles to the ranch house so that Mason could work his magic on the gearbox."

Rio smiled at the picture.

"Keys are in the ignition," she continued. "Don't trust the fuel gauge. It always registers half-full. If you're going more than fifty miles, drop by the ranch house. Diesel is in the blue tank to the left of the barn. Gasoline is in the red tank."

Rio nodded, started toward the truck, then turned back with an odd expression on his face. "Are you always this trusting with strangers?"

"No," she said evenly. She looked, but couldn't see more than a hint of brighter darkness where Rio's eyes were. "I don't trust strangers at all." Then she smiled at her own expense. "And I don't sleep under trucks with them, either. What about you, Rio? Do you let strangers ride off with your horse?"

"Never."

The quiet word told Hope more than she had teasingly asked. No one but Rio had ever ridden the hot-blooded mare.

Before she could say anything more, he came to her, laced his hands together to make a stirrup, and lifted her onto Dusk. The mare minced restlessly for a mo-

ment before she arched her neck around and sniffed her unexpectedly small rider's muddy boot.

Hope murmured calm words and stroked the mare's warm, ghostly-gray neck. At a gentle pressure on the rein, the horse's ears came up and she stepped eagerly into the gathering darkness.

"See you at home," Hope said.

The words carried softly back to the man who stood motionless, watching her until she merged with the night.

Six



BY THE TIME Hope rode into the ranch yard, she was wearing the jacket Rio had left tied behind his saddle. Despite being so tired that it was all she could do to stay awake, she almost hated to have the ride end.

Rio had been right about his mare. Dusk was the best night horse Hope had ever ridden. Most horses were balky or nervous to the point of wildness at being ridden alone into darkness. Not Dusk. She moved quietly, confidently, cleanly, like the man who had trained her. Even the sudden whistle of a startled dove's wings hadn't made her shy. As for the eerie harmonies of coyotes, Dusk had simply cocked her ears and walked on, unruffled.

Suddenly a rectangle of yellow light spilled out in the yard to meet Hope. Mason stood in the center of the light, silhouetted against the doorway.

"Nice pony," Mason said, satisfaction ringing in his voice. "Rio's?"

"Yep," Hope said, imitating Mason's laconic speech. He waited, but she didn't say any more. "Truck break down?" he asked.

"Nope."

Mason waited.

Silence.

"You lookin' for trouble, gal?" he asked in exasperation.

Smiling, she reined the gray mare toward the barn.

"Nope. Just dinner."

The old man mumbled something about serving her fried horse-apple pie and went back inside, banging the screen door behind him.

"Set an extra place," she called after him.

The door slammed open again.

"Rio's gonna do it?" Mason demanded. "He's gonna find water for you?"

"He's going to try."

Mason's whoop of triumph made the mare shy.

Hope was ready, because she had expected Mason's reaction. Even so, she had to grab the saddle horn or get dumped in the dust. The long-legged mare was very fast.

With a wary appreciation of her mount's speed, Hope dismounted. Her feet ached the instant they hit the ground. No matter how comfortable her battered cowboy boots might be, her feet were tired at the end of a day. So was she. She had been up since well before dawn. It would be the same tomorrow. And the day after that.

And every day until the rains came.

She led Dusk into a stall and rubbed her down thor-

oughly despite the fact that her arms cramped every time she lifted them above her shoulders.

"Are you hungry, girl?" she asked.

Dusk watched her with dark, liquid eyes.

"You're not as big as Storm Walker, but I'll bet you can eat as much as he can after carrying Rio around. That man is no lightweight."

The horse nudged her impatiently.

Hope laughed. "All right. You've more than earned it."

Humming quietly, she put several fat flakes of hay in the manger, poured grain in on one side, and hauled water for the stall trough from a spigot on the side of the house. She brushed the mare from forelock to heels, talking to her all the while. The flicking of black-tipped ears followed her words, but otherwise the mare was busy eating.

Only when Hope was certain that Dusk was content in her unfamiliar surroundings did she shut the stall door and walk slowly toward the ranch house. She was so tired that she felt like she was wading through mud. The thought of a long, hot, chin-deep bath made her want to moan.

"Then don't think about it," she muttered to herself. "There's enough water for drinking and for spit baths and not one drop more."

A basin of warm water waited for Hope in her bedroom. She peeled off her clothes, washed carefully, rinsed, and refused to let herself think about the bathtub across the hall. After a few swipes of the hairbrush through her dark, unquenchably curly hair, she went downstairs. Her stomach growled every inch of the way.

"Dinner?" she asked hopefully, hurrying into the kitchen.

"Light and set," Mason said, gesturing toward the table.

He hesitated as he reached for the gallon bottle of salad oil. It was heavy as well as slippery, and his hands hadn't been very cooperative for the past few days. He paused over the ingredients that were lined up on the counter, frowning as he tried to remember the ratio of vinegar to oil and salt to pepper for the salad dressing.

Hope could tell by the careful way Mason used his hands that the arthritis in his knuckles had flared up again. His pride, too, was in full flare. It was hard enough on his self-respect—and temper—when he couldn't handle the water truck and the hose for her. Not being able to handle kitchen work would be the final insult.

"I'll do it," she said easily. Then, as though she hadn't noticed Mason's difficulty with his fingers, she added with a wink, "You always use too much oil."

"Rabbit food," he said, his voice rich with disgust as he turned his back on the slick, treacherous bottle of oil. "When's Rio coming?"

"He said not to wait dinner."

"Then I'll just busy myself putting the *real* food on the table."

She snickered but didn't say a word.

He got out a heavy cast-iron frying pan and banged it onto an equally heavy iron burner.

"Price of beef went down half-cent a pound," he said.

Hope's smile slipped. She concentrated on making salad dressing.

Mason turned the burner up high. Blue and gold propane flames exploded around the black iron.

"Feed's up in cost," he said.

She hoped the icy fear in her stomach didn't show in her voice. "Ouch. Even if it's a mild winter, we'll be buying feed before spring."

"Nope."

She paused as she stirred the vinaigrette. "Why not?"

"Won't have no cows to eat it." Mason's faded green eyes looked squarely into hers. "Gonna have to sell some more range cows. You know it. I know it. Gotta be done."

Her face settled into stubborn lines. "Not yet. I can still water them for a while longer. Maybe it will rain soon."

"Maybe pigs will fly."

Head bowed, Hope beat the salad dressing until it was mostly froth.

Mason started to push the argument, then shrugged and let it go. As he had said more than once, she was stubborn but no fool.

"Don't kill yourself, honey." Butter sizzled in the frying pan. "Nothing's worth that." The solid weight of a steak smacked against hot iron. "We both know that the longer you wait to sell, the less them cows is gonna weigh. Natural feed's about gone and nothing's coming up to take its place. No rain."

Mason's matter-of-fact summary made Hope angry. Not because he was wrong, but because he was right.

"Then I'll haul feed," she said tightly.

He shook his head and didn't say a word. He knew that even if the two of them worked around-the-clock, they couldn't haul water and food to all the cattle.

Too many cattle.

Not enough hours in the day.

Not enough muscle between the two of them.

But Hope was young. She would have to discover her own limits. He had found his long ago, and the older he got the more those limits shrank in on him.

He stared at his swollen knuckles and cursed softly. He wasn't angry at life on his own account, but on hers. For her he would have endured the agonies of being young again, just to have the strength to help her build her dream. She was the daughter he had never had. He would have moved mountains for her if he could.

He couldn't. He could only love her.

Silently Mason lifted a corner of the steak, declared it cooked enough, and flipped it over.

After a time Hope quit beating the helpless dressing and put the beans and salad on the table. She heaped some of each on both plates. Then she opened the oven door and sniffed.

The tantalizing aroma of garlic curled up to her nostrils. At one time Mason had insisted that garlic bread was a foreign sacrilege that never should be allowed to mop up good American beef juices. Eventually he had become hooked on the pungent stuff.

"Eat it before the grease sets," he said, putting the sizzling beef in front of her.

She prodded the steak with her fork. "Did you hear that?"

"What?"

"It mooed at me."

Mason started to say something indignant before he saw the laughter lurking in her eyes. He smiled unwillingly, ruffled her just-brushed hair, and went back to the stove.

A low, sweetly rendered *mooooo* followed him.

He turned back quickly. An angelic-looking Hope was cutting into her bloody steak with every appearance of satisfaction.

"Mmmmmm," she said, chewing slowly. "Mason, nobody can almost cook a steak like you."

Smiling, singing off-key, a pleased Mason fried his own beef. It took even less time than hers had.

Soon the only sounds in the kitchen were those made by flatware against crockery plates, the occasional creak of old oak chairs when weight shifted forward or back on the seat, and the rapidly accelerating perk of the coffeepot as the liquid inside deepened in color and fragrance.

When Hope could eat no more, she took pity on the patient Mason and told him about the agreement she and Rio had made.

Mason listened quietly, nodded at the right moments, and smiled like a cat with feathers sticking out of its mouth. When Hope was finished talking, he wiped his mouth with a paper napkin and pushed back from the table.

"Well, better open the pipe to the water heater," he said.

She stared at him as though he had suggested frying one of the oak chairs for dessert. "What are you talking about?"

"Don't you want a bath, gal?"

"Well, of course, but—"

"Then don't keep me here jawing with you when bath-water could be heating up," he interrupted cheerfully.

"Mason." She spoke slowly, carefully, as though he was deaf or stupid or slightly crazy. "If I take a bath, there won't be any drinking water for tomorrow."

"Sure there will. Whole damn truckload."

Her mouth dropped open and stayed that way.

He snorted. "Look at you catching flies. What do you think Rio's doing out there on an empty belly, gal? Pushing that bastard truck around in the dark for the hell of it?"

Hope's mouth closed a lot more slowly than it had opened. "Do you really think . . ." she began wistfully, longing for a bath with every aching muscle in her body.

"Why don't you ask him yourself?"

The noise of the old water truck rattling into the ranch yard sounded loud in the sudden silence.

"Fast trip," Mason said. "Takes strength. Rio has it and then some."

Hope was too astonished for words. She hurried out into the front yard.

"Where do you want it?" Rio asked.

"I— You didn't have to do— Around back," she managed finally.

He looked past her into the night. *Around back* took in a lot of country, including the Perdidas cutting stars out of the clear night sky.

Laughing, she stepped onto the truck's running board and reached for the cab door. "I'll take care of it. You must be starved. Go in and eat."

Rio simply stared at her. He wasn't used to that kind of consideration from anyone, much less from a woman as tired as he knew Hope had to be. He smiled gently. "Thanks, but it won't take long for me to eat. You go on in and rest."

"After the water is put away."

He didn't argue. He knew how important every drop of water was to her. "Hang on."

She clung to the cab door as he eased the heavy truck around the house and up to a spot that had formerly been a lawn but now was little more than two tire tracks ground through a crust of dead grass. The pipe that had once brought water from the Hope had been cut and the stump threaded to allow the canvas hose to be coupled with it.

One look at the setup told Rio that it would be another wrestling match. He climbed down out of the cab, ready to do battle again with stubborn brass couplings and water-heavy hose.

Hope took a flashlight from the truck, bathing his hands in light while he coaxed the connection between the water truck and the buried cistern that served the ranch house. Soon water fattened the hose and fell into the nearly empty tank. Muted thunder rose from beneath their feet.

"How big is the tank?" he asked.

"It will hold half a truckload. Go in and eat. I'll watch over things out here."

He might have argued, but Mason stuck his head out of the back door and yelled, "Come and git it 'fore I feed it to the pigs."

"Do you have pigs?" Rio whispered to her.

"No, but I haven't had the heart to tell Mason."

"Too soft, huh?"

"For some people." Her smile was quick, but Rio caught its gleam. "Mason is one of them."

"Is Turner?" Rio asked, not knowing why.

Hope gave him a level glance. "I'm not around Turner long enough for it to matter either way."

"Sorry. None of my business."

She shrugged. "Everybody in a hundred miles has made it their business at one time or another. Why should you be different?"

He started to speak, then obviously thought better of it.

"Go ahead," she said with a sigh. "But please be original. Don't tell me Turner is an untrustworthy son of a bitch, because I already know it. Don't tell me that he's filthy rich, because I don't care."

"Is he crowding you?"

Something buried in Rio's voice, something dangerous, made Hope wish that it was light enough to see his expression clearly. "Nothing I can't handle."

"If that changes, let me know."

"You'll have to get in line after Mason," she said dryly.

"It would be a pleasure."

Hope didn't doubt that Rio meant every word. Obviously he and John Turner weren't very friendly. It

wasn't surprising. Anyone with an ounce of self-respect had a hard time getting along with Turner.

And Rio, despite his easy manner, had plenty of pride.

"This here dinner of yours ain't getting any hotter, Rio," Mason called. "Gal, you git on back in here and set. That damn hose ain't going nowheres and you know it."

Hope hesitated, then played the light once more over the coupling. It was tight. Barely any drops escaped. She went to the truck and put the flashlight back in its place.

While Mason stood impatiently, Rio waited for her, then walked by her side toward the yellow light pouring out of the house. He said nothing to her, simply moved quietly, his long-sleeved shirt brushing against hers in a silent companionship that needed no words.

For an instant Hope forgot that she was exhausted and that tomorrow would be worse, not better. An absurd feeling of well-being swept through her, as unexpected as Rio's gentle smile. She wanted to laugh and hold her arms up to the brilliant stars and feel their billion bright possibilities cascading into her hands.

Instead, she simply watched Rio from beneath her long lashes. Rio, the man who had made her remember all those bright possibilities.

"Mason," Rio said, holding out his hand, "it's been a long time."

"Too long." He took the younger man's hand in his own gnarled grasp.

Only Hope noticed the instant of hesitation when

Rio saw Mason's swollen knuckles. Then Rio shook hands firmly but very gently, sparing the older man's arthritic hand.

The feeling of warmth that had stolen through Hope increased, melting the ice that had come to her stomach when she admitted that her best well was rapidly going dry. Knowing that Rio cared enough about Mason to spare his pride made her certain that she had been right to trust Rio.

"Judy sends her love," Rio said, "and the kids want to know if you'll be up for Thanksgiving. From the sound of it, they're having a three-ring circus for dinner."

Mason's glance slid to Hope, then away. "Maybe," he said, promising nothing.

Rio nodded, understanding that Mason wouldn't leave Hope alone on the family holiday.

She understood, too, and wanted to protest. Judy was Mason's sister-in-law, the last connection he had to the dead wife he had loved for forty-two years. But Hope didn't protest aloud. She and Mason had argued over the subject too many times. He wouldn't go on a trip without her, and the ranch couldn't be left untended overnight, much less for several weeks.

"Water's warm," Mason said, gesturing toward the basin and towel waiting just inside the service porch.

With the quick, efficient motions Hope had come to expect from Rio, he swept off his hat, rolled up his sleeves, and washed as much skin as he could reach. When he was finished he looked around at the yard.

Then he picked up the basin and flipped its contents on the ground where a wilted lilac bush struggled to survive in the lee of the porch.

More of the ice inside Hope melted. She caught Mason's eyes and smiled approvingly.

While Rio ate, Hope enjoyed the uncommon luxury of sitting and doing nothing more strenuous than drinking a cup of Mason's potent coffee. As she sipped, she let her mind drift, dreaming lazily of a time when the ground would be green rather than hard as stone, and her cattle wouldn't have to walk themselves thin just to get from food to water and back again.

Rio's deep voice and Mason's age-roughened tones wove in and out of her waking dreams. She didn't really listen until the men began discussing beef and water.

"How many head are you going to sell?" Rio asked as he forked a juicy chunk of steak into his mouth.

"Not a single cow," Mason said flatly.

Surprised, Rio looked up. In the artificial light his eyes were like midnight-blue crystal, startling against the tanned planes of his face and the rim of his jet-black lashes.

"Boss don't want to sell," Mason explained. He pointed toward Hope with the stem of the ghastly old pipe he loved and she refused to let him set fire to indoors.

Without another word, Rio went back to eating.

"Aren't you going to tell me that the price of beef will only get lower and the cattle thinner?" Hope asked

him, her voice tight with the echoes of old arguments and refusals.

"Waste of time," Rio said. "You know your choices better than anyone in the room."

For a moment her new dream slid away from her, leaving her suspended in a cold present that had few choices, none of them pleasant.

"When you decide to cull the herd," Rio said matter-of-factly, "if I'm not here to help, use Dusk. She'll cut your work in half."

Hope nodded, unable to speak for the tears and the sudden fear squeezing her throat.

The more cattle she sold, the closer she came to the moment when she would have to auction off her beautiful Angus herd. They were the very soul of her dream of a new ranch, a new life, a future that held fat black cattle instead of the knife-lean Herefords of her nightmares.

In the water-rich future of her dream, the ranch house would ring with plans and laughter again. Maybe then she could dare to dream beyond the needs of the cattle to her own needs. Maybe then she could dream of a man who would love her, of having children who would grow up tall and straight on the land. . . .

Hope's empty coffee mug hit the table with a solid thump as she stood up, slamming the door on her treacherous thoughts. Not since she had turned eighteen had she allowed herself to dream of love and children. There was no point in dreaming about it now. She had other dreams, possible dreams, dreams that de-

pended only on her own strength and determination rather than on the unknowable, undependable mind of a man.

In her lifetime she had found few men to respect. She had found none whose children she wanted to have.

Seven



"THINK THE BATH water is hot yet?" Hope asked Mason.

"Not likely. But the buckets on the stove are near boiling. I'll haul 'em up for you."

"Don't bother," she said quickly. "Cook Rio another steak. He's doing the work of two men."

Before Mason could object, she went to the huge ranch stove. Two big buckets of water simmered over the hot flames. With them, plus some cool water from the faucet, she could have a lovely bath.

Hope picked some pot holders off a nail and reached for the wire handles that stood above the buckets. An instant later the pot holders vanished from her fingers and reappeared in Rio's big hands. With the easy strength that she envied, he lifted the full buckets off the flames and turned toward her.

"After you, ma'am," he drawled.

"Thank you," she whispered too softly for Mason to hear.

Rio nodded slightly, understanding and admiring her desire to protect the old man's pride.

While Rio followed her up the stairs, he admired something else. The womanly swing of her hips and the long, graceful line of her legs held his eye. The thought of sharing her bath teased his mind until he forced himself to think of something else.

Anything else.

Wanting a woman like Hope was at the top of his list of dumb things he could do. He was supposed to be smarter than to go looking for trouble.

He waited while she bent over and put the plug in the big, old-fashioned bathtub's drain. The feminine lines of her back and hips were even more alluring than her walk had been. Beneath the frosted glass globes of the bathroom lights, her hair had a rich satin shimmer that cried out to be stroked by a man's fingers.

She turned and looked over her shoulder at him with gold-flecked eyes and a generous mouth made for giving and receiving kisses.

"Ready?" she asked, wondering why Rio was watching her so intently.

Heat slammed out from the center of his body, hardening him in a rush of sensation that made his pulse beat heavily. He was more than ready. He was aching. His lips flattened into a line of disgust at his unexpected, unruly sexuality. He was acting like a kid with his first party girl—and God knew that he was no kid and Hope was no party girl.

Without a word he emptied buckets of scalding

water into the tub, turned, and left the steamy room and the woman who watched him with too many dreams in her eyes.

Drugged by heat and physical exhaustion, Hope dozed in the bath long after she was clean. Her dreams were a tantalizing mixture of water in all its forms—hot, cold, calm, racing, deep, shallow. And through all of it wove a midnight-blue river, deep and sweet, gentle and dangerous, longer than forever and more powerful than any drought. It called to her in Rio's voice, whispered to her the secrets of his midnight-blue eyes, caressed her flesh, and sank into her thirsty soul.

The sound of Behemoth rattling through the front yard startled her awake. The bathwater was still warm. She looked out the steamy window and saw the lights of the truck cutting through the night to the pasture where her Angus grazed in the darkness. The cattle bawled uneasily, then accepted the wheeled intruder. With only the moon's thin, cold smile for company, Rio began filling the stock trough.

Eager to talk with him even though she had nothing new to say, Hope washed and dried her hair. As she pulled on a clean shirt, the truck grumbled to life again. Hurriedly she yanked on her jeans and stuffed her bare feet into her boots.

Too late. Rio was already heading off into the night. She didn't have to ask or wonder where he was going. People and cattle alike needed more water in order to survive.

When she got downstairs, Mason had already gone to one of the ranch's two bunkhouses. He and his wife had converted the smaller bunkhouse into a home. But Hope didn't think Rio would be spending the night under Mason's roof. It wasn't that Mason was unfriendly. It was simply that the place was a cozy kind of mess.

Since Hazel's death, Mason's housekeeping had been of the lick-and-promise sort. He ignored Hope's offers of help. A lot of the bunkhouse hadn't been touched since the day Hazel had unexpectedly died. Mason had made it clear that he wanted it that way.

Hope hadn't argued. It was little enough comfort for the man who was the only family she had left.

But the state of Mason's bunkhouse meant that if Rio stayed at the Valley of the Sun, he would have to sleep in the other bunkhouse or in the house.

Hope rejected the possibility of the second bunkhouse as soon as she thought of it. It would take too long to clean out the pack rats, mice, spiders, and dust that had collected since the last of the ranch hands had left a year ago. Rio would have to use either the remaining upstairs bedroom in the ranch house or the daybed on the screened porch downstairs.

The thought of having him sleeping just down the hall from her upstairs room made a delicious sensation prickly over her body. Telling herself that she was being foolish, she made up the bed in the upstairs room and put out fresh towels. Then she made up the bed in the sunroom, shaking out the sheets and blankets with a brisk snap. To make the choice an even one, she set out towels on that bed, too.

Then she wrote a note and stuck it on the back door, telling Rio to take his pick of beds.

The note didn't say that she wanted him upstairs, that she wanted to fall asleep in his arms and wake up the same way. It certainly didn't hint of her hungry curiosity about his taste, the resilience of his body, the feel of him in passion.

"Don't be stupid," Hope said under her breath as she slid into her own bed. "He's here to find water, not to hammer me into a mattress."

She shivered at the sound of her own words. After Turner's bruising attack, she hadn't wanted any man to touch her.

Yet she couldn't think of Rio without wanting just that. To be touched by him.

The sound of the truck driving into the yard awakened Hope later in the night. The back door squeaked open. She held her breath and listened for the sound of a man's footsteps climbing the stairway.

The downstairs shower sputtered to life, shaking and hammering as water shoved air out of the pipes. Rio was as fast and efficient at showering as he was at everything else, because the water ran for only a few minutes.

She held her breath again.

A door creaked. It was the door that opened from the kitchen to the screened-in porch that ran along the back of the house.

Hope told herself that she wasn't disappointed. She

was still telling herself when she fell asleep. She didn't hear anything until her alarm went off in the small hours after midnight. Since she had worn her clean clothes to bed, it didn't take long for her to dress. She pulled on boots, jacket, gloves, and hat, and headed out into the darkness.

The predawn chill bit into unprotected flesh. Despite the lack of rain, it was still November. Hope's breath was a pale gust of steam that was absorbed instantly by the dry air, as though even the sky itself was thirsty for any bit of moisture.

The stars had a brittle brilliance that came only when there was almost no humidity in the air. A breeze stirred fitfully, bringing with it a cold promise. Winter was waiting to sweep down out of the north, riding on the back of the long, icy wind.

Hope rubbed her stinging nose, pulled her denim jacket closer around her body, and hurried into the barn. A rooster crowed like a rusty engine, then with greater force, although only an optimist would have said that dawn was near. Hens clucked and muttered as though resenting the rooster's loud summons to another day of pecking the dust and each other.

After she scattered food for the chickens, she checked the nests for eggs while the hens were busy-ing their sharp little beaks on grain. The drought hadn't upset the chickens in the least. Fifteen eggs waited within straw nests like huge pearls within shapeless golden shells. She pulled a paper bag out of her jacket pocket, carefully put the eggs inside, and

left the chickens to what they did best—eating and complaining.

When Hope went to check on Dusk, she saw that Rio had been up and in the barn. All the chores she usually did were already done. Fresh hay filled the mangers. All the horses were groomed, the stalls had been raked out. New straw gleamed on the floor of every stall.

Unexpectedly, her throat closed around tears or a protest or perhaps both. "Damn it, Rio. Didn't you get any sleep at all?" she asked huskily.

Dusk rubbed her head against Hope's chest. Automatically she petted the mare.

"Maybe he sleeps on his feet, like a horse."

Dusk rubbed harder, nearly knocking Hope off her feet.

She checked the side yard, wondering if maybe Rio had taken care of everything before he went to bed instead of after he got up. The dusty pickup truck that she and Mason used was gone. Mason was up and about already, and off on some errands of his own, leaving her alone on the ranch. Or else Rio had taken the truck.

Not that it mattered to her either way. She had no reason to make a long ride into town. What did matter, and what she reluctantly admitted to herself, was that she had been looking forward to seeing Rio this morning, to sharing coffee and breakfast and conversation with a dark stranger who seemed more familiar to her than most people she had known for years.

Carrying the fresh eggs, Hope hurried across the dusty, gravel-strewn yard between the barn and the

ranch house. She hesitated at the back-porch door. A quick glance told her what she already suspected. Rio was gone. He hadn't even left a trace of his presence. The daybed was made up with military crispness and the braided rag rug lay smoothly in place on the uneven floor. Not only was the washbasin empty, it had been wiped dry until the old metal gleamed.

It was as though she had dreamed yesterday afternoon at the stock tank, the unexpected luxury of a hot bath, and the compelling man with night-black hair and gentle hands.

With an unconscious sigh she went into the kitchen. Normally Mason would have been up and making coffee strong enough to float horseshoes. But the kitchen was as clean and empty as the washbasin had been. A note on the scarred table explained that Mason had taken Rio to the Turner ranch to pick up his truck. Rio would come back after work. Mason would turn up sometime before noon.

Hope fixed breakfast and ate quickly, hardly taking the time to admire the color and freshness of the eggs. She poured coffee into a large thermos, tucked it under her arm, and hurried toward the water truck. She had three other stock tanks to fill, one of them even larger than the tank she had trucked water to yesterday. Twice.

She wouldn't get every stock tank completely full. There simply wasn't enough time. All she could do was haul enough water to each tank to keep the cattle

from drifting off into wild country in a futile search for something to drink.

With a deep, unconscious sigh Hope opened the heavy truck door and swung up into the cab. The engine grumbled and coughed and backfired and grumbled some more, but finally ran. She let out the clutch, turned the wheel, and discovered that the truck was ungodly heavy. The only explanation was that its tank was already brimful of water.

Not only had Rio filled the trough in the Angus pasture, he had driven all the way back to the Turner well, filled up again, and driven all the way home. All that, after a full day of work with Turner's horses, and another full day ahead of him.

Hope blinked rapidly, trying not to burst into tears at this new evidence of Rio's thoughtfulness.

"Oh, wonderful," she muttered to herself, swallowing hard. "You stand to lose everything you ever had or wanted and you don't even snuffle. But let somebody be kind to you and you spring a leak. Get a grip, girl. You're no good to anyone if you snivel."

Despite the bracing lecture, she had to blink several times before she could see well enough to steer the awkward rig out of the yard and onto the dirt road. She drove as quickly as she could to the nearest well. It was the oldest one on the ranch, all but hidden in an unexpected hollow of the land.

The windmill was motionless when she got there, for it was too early in the day for the wind to blow. It wasn't too early for the cattle to be thirsty, yet

none were pressed around the trough, eager for water.

Fear squeezed Hope's heart, making it beat harshly. *Why aren't the cattle crowding around to drink? Are they lost? Stolen?*

Dead of thirst?

Then she caught the gunmetal gleam of water brimming in the trough and understood what had happened. This time she couldn't stop the tears from spilling down her cheeks. Rio had filled this trough, let the cattle drink, and filled it again, until the cattle were full, all thirst slaked.

Then he had emptied the last of the truck's water into the trough, gone to the Turner well, and filled up once more, working long hours while she relaxed in a hot bath and slept more soundly than she had in months.

Rio had done all of it without being asked, because he knew she was too stubborn—and too afraid—to admit that she had to cull her herd again, selling off the range cattle she didn't have the time or strength to haul water to.

"Damn you, Rio," she whispered, tasting her own tears on her lips. "You're not fighting fair."

Then she realized that he wasn't fighting at all. He was simply doing what had to be done if she wanted to keep what was left of her range cattle.

And her dream.

"He worked most of the night to give you half a day's start," she told her reflection in the dusty wind-

shield. "Are you going to use it or are you going to sit here and cry enough to fill the trough all over again?"

She wiped her eyes, took a fresh grip on Behemoth's wheel, and drove toward a more distant well. When she got there, she was half-afraid to look. She didn't know what she would do if Rio had somehow managed to be there before her.

He hadn't. Cattle crowded around the useless windmill and the nearly empty stock tank.

She drove the truck in close, wrestled the hose into place, and sat in the cab while the trough filled and the sun climbed out of night's deep well. She loved the pale tremors of peach and rose that preceded dawn, and the incandescent orange and scarlet that silently shouted the arrival of yet another day.

Despite the drought, despite her deep fear of losing everything, despite the exhaustion that would come before sunset, Hope counted each day spent on the ranch as a separate miracle. There was no place on earth for her like the Valley of the Sun.

She rolled down the window of the cab and listened to water rushing into the tank. Cattle bawled and shoved and thrust their dusty white faces eye-deep in the water, drinking lustily. Smiling at the sight, she settled back into Behemoth's rump-sprung seat and dozed to the rich sounds of water pouring.

"I'll expect you for dinner," Mason said to Rio. "Six o'clock sharp. Earlier if you can make it."

"If I'm not there at six, go ahead without me. I'll eat mine cold when I get there."

Mason looked up at the sky. The sun was about a hand's width above the horizon, but he didn't need light to know that today would be another day without a prayer of rain. He could taste the dryness in the air, feel it on his lips, hear it in the crackle of static electricity whenever he slid around on the pickup's vinyl seat.

"You got here at sunup," Mason said calmly. "Even a mean, lazy son of a bitch like Turner can't expect much more than twelve hours a day from a hand, specially when he's only paying for eight and expects you to eat lunch in the saddle."

Rio shrugged and tugged his hat down. Turner was riding him hard, but there wasn't any need to complain to Mason about it. Rio knew, even if Mason didn't, that John Turner came down like a load of stone on any man who showed up at Hope's ranch. Even if she had the money to hire more hands, Turner would have found a way to drive them off the Valley of the Sun. He didn't want any man under sixty within a country mile of Hope Gardener.

A predatory smile curved Rio's mouth. Sooner or later, Turner would stop hiding behind being the boss and start leaning on Rio openly.

Rio was looking forward to it.

"The longer hours I work, the sooner I'm shed of Turner," Rio said easily. "See you tonight."

With a wave, Mason turned the truck around and headed it toward the gate. He was almost halfway to

the town of Cottonwood. Might as well go the rest of the way and run a few errands. Seemed like every time he turned around, one ranch machine or another chewed up a hose part or something.

Before he got to the gate, a man on horseback trotted up to the truck. Recognizing Pete Babcock, a man who used to work for the Valley of the Sun, Mason braked and rolled down the window. Babcock was a schoolteacher-turned-cowboy, a gossip, and a hard worker. Mason had hated to let him go, but there hadn't been any choice.

"Morning, Mason. Haven't seen you since calving time. You here to hire some men?"

"Wish I could say so, but it'd be a lie. I was just dropping Rio off."

Pete nodded and squinted toward the east, where the sun was just lifting its burning head above the ragged land. "Heard he was working for Miss Hope. Digging a well or some such."

"You heard right. He's gonna find us some water."

"Sure hope so. Miss Hope could use a break." Pete smiled, showing two rows of gleaming teeth. "It's a day for miracles, sure enough. The boss got up before any of us did and lit out of here like his ass was on fire. Said something to Cook about checking on the south well."

Mason went still. "South well? The one we've been hauling water from?"

"The same. Don't know what got into him. Usually he's the last one in the saddle and the first one back to the corral."

“When did he leave?”

“Oh, ’bout an hour ago. Maybe more. I was just getting up myself.”

“Nice talking to you,” Mason said quickly. “I’ll let you know as soon as we’re hiring.”

Before the other man could answer, Mason let out the clutch and took off for the gate, tires spitting gravel every inch of the way.

Eight



HOPE SHIFTED SLOWLY out of her half-dozing state and looked around. The canvas hose was flat, the truck's barrel empty of all but a cup or two of water. It was time to head to Turner's well for the first of several trips she would make today.

The road to the well was rough and tiring. Behemoth didn't have anything as modern as power steering, automatic shift, or power brakes. Driving the truck was a test of will and muscle that left her aching. She looked forward to the time when water would be sucked from the well into the truck's big tank. That was when she could rest, gathering her strength for the drive back to the Valley of the Sun. The truck was three times as awkward fully loaded as it was empty.

As soon as Hope turned down into the little valley where the Turner well was, she knew that there wouldn't be any peace and quiet for her while the truck filled with water. John Turner's Jeep was parked just

beyond the windmill. The vehicle's bright red paint usually gleamed like a stoplight, but today the color was dulled by a heavy coat of dust, the kind that came from racing over a dirt road.

Her hands tightened on the wheel until her knuckles stood out white. She hissed a word under her breath, hating the sick sinking of her stomach and the clammy sweep of fear over her skin. Turner was quite literally the last man on earth she wanted to see.

Slowly she eased the truck into place by the generator, shut off the ignition, and hopped out with a lightness she was far from feeling. The sight of Turner's six feet four inches of thick-shouldered body didn't do anything for her except make her wish that she was somewhere else. Anywhere else. As long as he wasn't with her.

Since the drought and the second mortgage on her ranch, Turner had been hovering around her like a vulture circling over a downed antelope, waiting for it to give up and die.

"Morning," Hope said as she walked by Turner to get to the hose rack at the rear of the truck. "You're up bright and early."

Turner didn't make a move to help her handle the stiff, heavy canvas hose. "Where's Mason?" he asked.

She didn't bother to stop working and be sociable. She could talk and work at the same time. Especially to John Turner.

"I don't know," she said indifferently. "Do you need him for something?"

As Hope spoke, she wrestled a few coils of stiff can-

was hose off the rack and scrambled over to the stock tank, dragging the muddy length of hose behind.

"I don't need that old man," Turner said, "but you sure as hell do."

She didn't glance away from her work.

"Look at you," Turner said in disgust. "Driving a man-sized truck and dragging that dirty old hose around like a drifter working off a handout. If Mason can't haul his own weight, fire him. Only a fool would pay the old fart's wages and then turn around and do his work for him."

Silently Hope pushed the hose into the tank far enough to be sure that the coils wouldn't leap out and flop around when water coursed through canvas. She took an extra amount of time about her work. She was counting on it to help control her anger at Turner's arrogance.

Without even looking at him, she climbed down the stock tank's narrow metal ladder to the muddy ground, caught up the end of the hose that had to be coupled to the generator-driven pump, and dragged the hose into place near the rusty, sunstruck machine.

Turner stalked after her. "Well?" he demanded.

"Well what." Her tone said that she wasn't really asking because she really didn't care.

This was the tricky part of the water-hauling operation. She had to brace the hose so that its weight wouldn't drag the brass coupling apart, while at the same time she struggled to bring the warped threads into alignment.

"I asked you a question," he snapped.

"I answered it. I don't know where Mason is."

"That's not what I meant and you know it." Turner jerked off his pearl-gray hat and slapped it against his thigh impatiently. His men knew it was a warning sign that he was losing his temper. He figured Hope knew it, too.

From the corner of her eye, she saw Turner's wavy chestnut hair gleam richly in the sunlight. His blue eyes were narrow and intent in his cleanly sculpted face. At one time the sight of that movie-star profile and curly hair had made her heart beat faster. But she was no longer young. Turner's shiny hair meant less to her than the dusty red hides of her range cattle.

A lot less.

The threads slipped and jammed. Hope set her teeth, unscrewed the crooked coupling, and tugged the heavy hose back into position.

If Turner had taken his hands out of his pockets and helped, the job would have gone quickly. As it was, Hope wasted several minutes before she succeeded in lining up the threads. She turned the brass ring carefully, always making sure that the threads stayed in the proper position. Holding her breath, she coaxed the coupling into a good mate.

"What the hell's got into you?" he asked finally, his voice harsh.

She reminded herself that she was using Turner's water. It was all that kept her from ignoring him completely. She got up, dusted off her hands, and went back to the truck for the big wrench to tighten the coupling.

"Hope," Turner said in a threatening voice, "*you better answer me.*"

"All I heard was a lecture on my stupidity. If you had a question, you'll have to repeat it." Her voice was as even and measured as her motions. She worked the jaws of the heavy pipe wrench until it fitted over the brass ring on the hose.

"What the hell was Rio doing at your ranch last night?" Turner asked baldly.

Anger shot through Hope as hotly as the sunlight pouring over the land. Yet when she spoke, her voice was so carefully controlled that it had no tone at all. "He works for me part-time."

"I told you not to hire him."

The wrench clanged against the ring. She readjusted the jaws, took a better grip, and tightened the coupling with a vicious downward yank.

"Well, baby doll? Didn't I tell you?"

"Do I tell you how to run your ranch?" she asked, shifting her grip for another yank.

"I'm a man."

"The day you run your ranch using nothing but your gonads is the day I'll listen to that argument," she said coldly. "Until then, I'll run my ranch like any normal person would—with my brain and my hands."

She yanked down again. The coupling was so tight that it all but sang with tension.

With practiced motions she loosened the wrench, removed it, and propped it against the generator. Time to prime the pump. She grabbed a bucket and went to the trough.

Turner watched her without moving or speaking.

He didn't have to say a word. She could tell by the color of his face and the set of his jaw that he was furious. His blue eyes looked pale against his flushed cheeks.

"Fire Rio," Turner snarled.

"No."

Hope labored over the pump and generator. Finally she got the crank to turn hard and fast enough to start the balky engine. The pump sputtered, the hose shuddered, and water began sliding through canvas into the empty truck. The muted thunder of water filling the truck normally soothed her. Today she barely heard it for the angry roaring of blood in her own ears.

"You like using my water?" Turner asked.

The fear that leaped inside Hope didn't show in her face. "Are you saying that if I don't fire Rio, you'll shut off the water?"

Turner hesitated. Put that bluntly, it didn't sound reasonable or even particularly rational. As far as he was concerned, Hope's struggle to keep the Valley of the Sun alive was irritating and laughable, but it had attracted more than a little admiration in the closed community of western cattle ranchers. When people found out that he had refused to give her water—water that he didn't need—simply because she had hired a drifter to find a well, Turner would be the butt of hostile gossip and outright contempt among the other ranchers.

"No decent woman would be alone with Rio," Turner said tightly.

"Why?" Hope tried not to show her temper. She failed. She was tired and furious, a combination that loosened her tongue. "Does Rio promise to marry a naive eighteen-year-old, invite her over for birthday champagne, and maul her until she's bruised and screaming? Then does Rio shove a hundred-dollar bill into the girl's blouse and tell her he's engaged, but he'll be around later to collect the rest of what's owed him?"

"That's got nothing to do with—"

"You asked," she shot back, "and I'm telling you." She faced him with hazel eyes that were harder and less feeling than glass. "After the mauling and insulting, does Rio's father drive the girl home, lecturing her the whole way on how she can't expect to marry above herself?"

Turner made a wide gesture with his right hand, sweeping aside her words. "Rio's no goddamn good. He's got women all over the West."

"Are they complaining?"

Turner shrugged impatiently. "Who the hell cares?"

"If the women like it and Rio likes it," Hope said neutrally, "what's the problem?"

"They aren't my women. You are."

"No," she said curtly. "I'm not."

"Bullshit, baby doll. You're mine. You want me. You just don't want to admit it."

"Well, we agree on one thing. *Bullshit.*"

Turner's flush deepened. "Listen, I've had enough of your holier-than-thou act. Your mother was a drunk, your father was a loser, and your sister was a slut with

a reputation from here to Los Angeles. Hell, even your grandparents weren't much more than dirt farmers."

"Thank you," she said sardonically. "Always nice to know your friends."

"Hell. It's just the truth. You should be glad I'm offering you more than a hundred dollars a fuck. I want you and I'm going to have you."

"I. Don't. Want. You."

Turner laughed and shook his head. It took more than a few words to puncture his confidence.

"Sure you do, baby doll," he said, reaching for her. "But like I said, you just don't want to admit it. Since you don't believe me, I'll just have to show you what I mean."

She blocked his grab by swinging the heavy wrench between them. He laughed and made another try for her. She leaped to the side and brought the wrench up again.

"That's it," he said, his voice thickening with excitement. "I dream about your little hands clawing and fighting me." He grabbed the wrench and held it despite her struggles. "Yeah. Good. God, it turns me on so hard I can't think when a woman fights me. Remember?"

Hope remembered all too well. She dropped the wrench, twisted out of his reach, and leaped into the cab. Her fist slammed down the lock on the door just as he grabbed the handle.

Laughing, Turner bent to pick up the wrench. It wouldn't take more than a moment to smash out the window. Just as his fingers closed around the cold iron

handle, he heard the sound of a vehicle racing down into the valley at a speed too fast for the road.

Assuming that it was one of his own men coming to check on the well, Turner straightened and turned toward the road, still smiling with anticipation of finally having Hope. His smile vanished when he spotted Hope's own beat-up tan truck pulling a rooster tail of dust toward the stock tank. Mason was behind the wheel, driving like a maniac toward Behemoth.

When she recognized the truck, a wave of relief swept through Hope that left her light-headed. Only then did she admit how much Turner frightened her. She was safe now. Mason was here. Mason wouldn't let Turner near her.

In the next heartbeat she knew that she couldn't tell Mason what would have happened if he hadn't arrived. He would lose his temper and jump Turner.

She couldn't let that happen. Mason would be beaten, and beaten badly. Turner liked using his huge strength on weaker people, hitting and hurting them with his thick hands.

She remembered just how much he liked it.

With an effort of will Hope forced her breathing to slow until her body relaxed and her hands stopped trembling.

"Well, old man," Turner said when Mason got out of the truck, "you finally hauled your lazy ass out of bed. I thought I was going to have to do all Hope's work myself."

With eyes that were so narrow they showed almost no color, Mason gave the other man a contemptuous glance. Then Mason saw the wrench lying in the dust

and Hope inside the water truck with the window rolled up and the door lock down. Blind rage shot through Mason, shaking him.

"I'm here," he said flatly. "I'm staying. We don't need your help."

Turner smiled amiably. He was sure Hope meant yes even though she was saying no, but he didn't necessarily want witnesses when he made her admit it. Theirs was a private fight. It was going to stay that way.

His word against hers.

"Then I guess I'll get on back to the ranch." Turner looked up at Hope as she opened the truck door. "See you real soon, baby doll. I'm looking forward to it."

"Good-bye." Her voice was like her face, without expression.

When he slammed the door to his Jeep and shot away from the well, Hope swung down from the cab and forced herself to smile at Mason.

"Glad you stopped by," she said casually. "It gets real boring just talking to a bunch of cows while the truck fills with water."

"Did that shit-eating coyote lay a hand on you?"

"Nope," she said honestly.

What she didn't say was that Turner had tried his best. If she had been any slower, she would have been on her back in the dirt.

Mason waited for Hope to say more. He knew he was getting only part of the truth, the part she wanted him to know. He started to say something, then bit it off. His lips flattened into a colorless line.

"I'll do the water hauling from now on," he said.

"No." Her voice was smooth and calm. It left no opening for an argument. "But if you'd like to ride shotgun," she added, smiling widely at him, "I'd love to have the company. Like I said, talking to the cows isn't real stimulating."

He looked at her for another long moment. She was smiling her familiar, heart-warming smile, but her skin was too pale. He was certain that Turner had tried something. It was what Mason had feared since the instant Pete had told him about the boss getting up real early and going to check on the south well.

Though few men spoke aloud about it, Hope wasn't the first woman to find herself on the rough end of Turner's arrogance. Only one girl had gone to the sheriff over it. The humiliation that had followed was a lesson to any other female who thought she had the same rights as Big Jase Turner's son.

Mason knew that no matter what happened, Hope wouldn't say anything to him about Turner. She was trying to protect Mason's pride. Just like she had by taking over the water runs. She knew that Mason's hands were too bad right now to handle the heavy truck and the stubborn couplings. He wouldn't have a chance against a man less than half his age and nearly twice his weight.

Silently, secretly, Mason cursed the fate that had let him live long enough to lose his beloved wife and then grow too old to defend the woman who meant as much to him as any blood daughter could have.

"I'll ride with you from now on," he said quietly.

Hope didn't argue. She was relieved to know that she wouldn't have to face Turner alone again. The man

simply didn't understand plain English. To him, *no* was a coy prelude to a wrestling match.

Maybe that was how his other women liked it, but not Hope. The thought of fighting Turner both frightened and sickened her. Like the thought of having his hands all over her again. It made breakfast do a backflip and try to climb right up her throat.

Mason went to the pickup truck and lifted a rifle from the rack that stretched across the rear window. He checked the load, eased the firing pin back into place, and pulled a box of shells out of the glove compartment. When he came back to Hope, he was smiling.

There was something in his smile that made her very glad to be his friend rather than his enemy.

"Snake gun," Mason said laconically. His voice was rough with age and the fury that still turned deep inside his gut at the thought of Turner lying in wait for Hope like a coyote at a water hole. "Drought like this, you git snakes at the wells."

She cleared her throat. "Yes, I've noticed that."

He stopped smiling and looked at her unflinchingly. "If I ain't around and you gotta go to a well, you be goddamn sure you got a snake gun with you. And you keep it real close to hand no matter what you're doing. Hear me, Hope?"

She tried to smile. She couldn't. Instead, she hugged Mason quickly. "I hear you."

He nodded curtly. "I'll watch the pump. You go over that little rise and run some rounds through this here rifle. Been a long time since we done any shooting together."

Hope didn't argue that she would rather have dozed in the cab. She took the gun and the shells and walked over a rise until she came to a place where there would be no chance of a ricochet hitting any cattle. She found a particularly ugly clump of big sage growing against the bank of a dry ravine, mentally labeled the bush *John Turner*, and began trimming it down to size one twig at a time.

When Hope had shot enough rounds to soothe Mason and herself, she walked back over the rise to the well. Mason was tinkering with the generator. Whatever he was doing had an immediate effect; the sound of the engine decreased by about half. He stood up to listen, nodded, and bent over the machinery again. There was a long-spouted oilcan in his hand.

"You're incredible," she said, half-exasperated, half-delighted. "I oiled that blasted machine from one end to the other two days ago and it didn't get a bit less noisy."

He smiled, pleased that there was something he could still do right despite his aching hands. "You done fine, honey, but you don't like this generator and she knows it. Takes a gentle hand to keep her humming."

"Not to mention gas and oil," Hope said beneath her breath. Her fuel bills were a constant drain on her cash. She reached out to unscrew the fuel-reservoir cap and gauge the contents with a pessimistic eye.

"Already checked it. It'll do 'til tomorrow."

Hope hesitated, made sure the cap was on tight, and unconsciously squared her shoulders. "When I get back to the ranch, I'm calling Hawthorne."

It had to be done and Mason knew it. But nobody had to like it.

He took off his hat, rubbed his forehead, and settled his hat back into place with a quick jerk. "How many you selling?"

Closing her eyes, she tried not to think about her range cattle burning like garnets against a sunset ridge-line where piñon grew in ragged lines of black flame.

"I—I don't know. Half." She swallowed. "Yes, half. That should stretch the natural feed enough to last until the rain comes."

"Hawthorne gonna use his own men for the cows?"

"He did the last time." Hope bit back a curse and shrugged instead. Whining never made a job easier. "If he can't use his own men, I'll hire the Johnston boys. They love a roundup."

Mason smiled. "Yeah. Good kids. A mite young, but we all was once."

She remembered her own teenage years and smiled a bittersweet smile. "Yeah. Real young."

He rested his hand on her shoulder and squeezed. The gesture said all that he didn't have the words to tell her: respect, support, love, understanding. He had never been more proud of her than at this moment, when she squared her shoulders and faced what had to be done without complaining.

"You grew into a damned fine woman," he said simply.

"I just do what I have to for the ranch." She smiled crookedly and looked around the dry, mysterious land that was part of her soul. "I spent most of my time after

I was fourteen being homesick for the Valley of the Sun. I hated L.A. Julie and Mom loved it."

Hope sighed and fell silent. If her father hadn't had to pay for two homes, he would have had enough cash to look for more wells. But her mother had insisted on having her daughters go to high school in a "civilized place." So her father had taken the ranch's small profits and mailed them to L.A. Then he had prayed that the Hope well would keep on running sweet and pure until he had saved enough money to dig a deeper well.

"Poor Dad," she said softly, not realizing that she had spoken aloud.

Mason put his arm around her shoulder. "Don't go feeling sorry for him. He done what he wanted and let hell take the rest."

Her throat ached with tears she wouldn't cry. "But he worked so hard."

"He didn't grudge a bit of it. He lived for the summers when you and your ma came home."

Mason didn't mention Julie. Hope's sister had always been a beautiful butterfly child, barely able to stand up to the heat of a simple summer day. The hard work and isolation of the Valley of the Sun had defeated her as much as they had bored her.

Hope had been the opposite. She loved the heat, the isolation, the silence, and the sight of cattle moving through the piñons. She had been born for this land in a way that her mother had never understood.

Mason smiled, remembering the good times. "Having you following him around with bright eyes and

bushels of questions made your dad feel taller than God and smarter than Satan."

Hope smiled sadly. She had loved her father very much.

So had her mother, something that Hope hadn't realized until her mother was dead and a grieving daughter found the letters that her parents had written while they were separated.

"Mom loved him," she said.

Mason sighed. "Love. Hate. Coins have two sides. Your ma's passions ran deep. Deeper than the wells we never drilled."

Hazel eyes looked up at Mason, seeing the past in his lined face, hearing it in his familiar voice.

"You're like her in that, honey, when you let yourself be. You got your dad's grit, though. His and then some. You musta got Julie's, too." Mason shook his head at the memories welling up like a clear, unexpected spring. "She was pretty as a Christmas calf, and just as sure to die young."

A familiar tightness settled in Hope's throat. She had loved her older but not wiser sister, had held her hand through wrongheaded affairs and brutal rejections. Hope had tried to talk with Julie, to help her understand and cope with a world that simply did not care whether one Julie Gardener had champagne and roses or vinegar and skunkweed.

Julie had never accepted the basic truth of the world's indifference. Her self-absorption had been both innocent and soul-deep. After their mother had died, Julie discovered drugs.

She had died within two years.

"Don't look so down in the mouth, honey." Mason tugged gently on a handful of Hope's dark curls. "Julie just wasn't made for this world. It happens that way, time to time. So you bury the ones that can't make it and you wipe your eyes and you get on with living. Because you was made for this world, Hope. No mistake about it. You're strong and straight and giving. You was made to love a good man and raise strong sons and daughters with staying power. You and your children will heal the Valley of the Sun. And then the past will all be worth it, all the dying and the tears and the pain."

Looking at Mason's seamed face and clear eyes, she felt his certainty like a benediction. She stood on tip-toe and kissed his gray-stubbled cheek. "You're a good man," she whispered, her voice catching. "The best."

He smiled gently at her and handed her a faded scarlet bandanna to catch the tears that were welling from her wide hazel eyes.

"Thanks." She laughed oddly as she wiped her eyes. "Lately I seem to have more water than my namesake well."

"You're tired, honey. You're doing the work of two men."

Hope's only answer was a long, ragged sigh and a shrug. "Not of two men like Rio. Did he get any sleep at all last night?"

"He's a tough son." Approval warmed Mason's laconic statement.

"But it isn't fair for him to—"

"Fair don't water no cows," Mason interrupted bluntly. "You git to worryin' about fair and you won't have no time left to smile. Take my word for it, gal. I been there."

"The least I can do is fix up the other bunkhouse for him to use."

"Don't bother. Rio liked the porch just fine. If it gits too cold," Mason added matter-of-factly, "he can take one of the upstairs bedrooms."

Hope knew her shock showed on her face. She had expected Mason to object to any arrangement that ended up with Rio and the unmarried boss lady sharing the house.

"Something wrong?" Mason asked.

"I don't know."

"Speak plain, honey. I'm an old man."

She snorted. "As long as I've been at the ranch, you've been standing over cowhands with a shotgun if they so much as said hello to me. But Rio—Rio moves into the house with me and you don't turn a hair."

"He's different."

"Are you saying he likes men better?" she asked baldly.

Mason laughed and shook his head at the things she had learned during her modeling career. Then he looked at Hope with eyes that were faded by age and made wise by experience. "Nope. He's not married, neither. But that's not why Rio won't touch you."

She made a wry face and swiped her hand down her blouse, brushing out dust. "I'm not real happy about touching myself right now."

Mason didn't smile. "Oh, you tempt him sure enough. He ain't blind. But he won't do nothing about it."

"Why?" she asked, her voice tight with the surprising pain she felt. "Is something wrong with me?"

"You know better, honey. Rio's just got too much respect for you—and for hisself—to bite off something he ain't got no mind to chew."

"What does that mean?"

"Rio knows you're a permanent sort of woman. And Rio . . ." Mason rubbed his neck and shrugged. "Rio's a temporary sort of man. He never stays nowhere for more than a few months at a time. Just the way he is. Footloose as the wind."

Hope said nothing for the simple reason that her throat was closed tight. She didn't doubt the truth of what Mason was saying. In the deepest part of her mind she knew that he was absolutely right.

And in the deepest part of her heart she wished that he was absolutely wrong.

Nine



BECAUSE THERE WAS no one around to notice, Hope climbed slowly, almost painfully, down from Behemoth's cab. Stretching helped, but not much. Her arms were cramped and aching from the effort of manhandling the heavy vehicle out of ruts and through tight curves.

Even with only half the range cattle left to take care of, she still had barely enough hours in the day to make the necessary water runs. Since Hawthorne's men had trucked away her cattle last week, she had worked constantly while dry winds churned dust devils out of an empty sky.

In the past week the temperature had dropped into the low sixties for several days. The nights had edged down toward freezing. Rain had been predicted yesterday and the day before, part of a northern storm front sweeping down from Alaska and Canada.

So far, no rain had fallen.

Half-eager, half-dreading what she would see, Hope looked toward the Perdidas rising tall and hard from the dry land. Thin clouds shimmered and swirled around the rugged peaks. Other patches of clouds floated randomly in the deep blue sky.

Not enough.

Not nearly enough.

Although the air was no longer so dry that it burned against Hope's skin, rain hadn't fallen in the high desert. Only the mountains had been blessed with water. Clouds had condensed in the cold air high up the Perdidas. After a day, moisture thickened into a black veil stitched with glittering threads of lightning. Wind carried the sound of thunder to the desert below like a distant sigh, bringing with it a scent of rain that was as thin as a shadow.

Some of the temporary creeks that drained the Perdidas' rugged slopes carried small streams of water again. There wasn't much, but it was enough so that the most adventurous cattle could spread out from the wells. Every cow that moved out into the countryside eased the strain on the natural feed around the troughs. The animals were on the edge of dangerously overgrazing the land around the wells, damaging it beyond repair or recovery.

Yet the small pools in the creek beds and ravines were already drying up. The parched land and dry air sucked up water much faster than it could be replaced by mountain runoff. If it didn't rain again soon, there wouldn't be any more surface water around than there had been a week ago.

If it didn't rain soon, she would have to haul feed as well as water to her remaining range cattle.

"You're borrowing trouble again," she told herself. "No need to do that. God knows you have enough without going looking for more."

Nearby an Angus mooed and walked with heavy grace toward her. The cow's eyes were huge, dark, and had lashes as long as Hope's little finger. The animal's coat was thick, slightly curly, and had a black satin richness that begged to be stroked. Butting gently against Hope's arm, the cow demanded attention.

"Hello, Sweetheart." Smiling, she rubbed her palms vigorously over the cow's long, solid back. Automatically she looked for any cuts or scratches that might need a swipe from the bottle of gentian violet that she always kept in the truck. "Where's your Sweet Midnight?"

Sweetheart snuffled.

"Out running around again, huh?" she said sympathetically, scratching the base of the cow's blunt ears. "Well, what do you expect of a half-grown bull calf?"

Sweetheart butted Hope less gently this time. The cow knew there was a handful of grain somewhere nearby.

Laughing, Hope shoved against the cow's muscular neck. She might as well have shoved on the Perdidás. Sweetheart stood pat on her four sturdy legs, demanding her due as Hope's first and most favored Angus.

"Sweetheart, if I'd known eight years ago that such a cute little 'kivver' would grow into twelve hundred

stubborn pounds of confident cow, I'd have sold you for steaks."

The Angus blinked her incredibly long-lashed eyelids. Her moist muzzle prodded Hope's stomach again.

Giving up the game, Hope went back to the truck's cab. She untied the grain bag, picked up a battered cake pan, and scooped out some grain.

"Here you go, girl."

Sweetheart cleaned the pan with more enthusiasm than manners. Her long, thick, surprisingly agile tongue slicked over the metal until nothing was left but a vague scent of oats. The cow lifted her head and looked patiently at Hope.

"Nope," she said. "Just one pan for you."

She threw the pan back in the truck and started to pull the hose off the back. As she dragged the ragged canvas tube toward the well, Sweetheart backed off a bit and watched with what could have been interest, confusion, or amusement.

None of the more than thirty black cattle crowded in around the trough as Hope filled it. She was careful not to let the water get so low in the Angus trough that there would be shoving matches and trampling hooves around the big tank. Her breeding animals were too valuable to risk in a free-for-all among thirsty cows.

To Hope, the Angus were the very core of her dream of building the Valley of the Sun into a productive ranch. For that—and for their massive, muscular beauty—Hope loved the Angus. Sweetheart was more a pet than the lean cats that kept the barn from being taken over by mice.

Sweetheart was also a valuable breeder. Hope had kept four of Sweetheart's calves for the breeding herd. Sweet Midnight, the most recent of her calves, showed promise of being a prizewinning bull. Several ranchers had offered to buy the robust yearling. Hope had turned them down, even though the money would have helped her out. She was saving for the future.

Sweet Midnight would be the founding sire of the Valley of the Sun's Angus herd. The cows he would breed were as carefully researched and chosen by Hope as Sweetheart had been. Their bloodlines were the finest. It showed in their bulky grace, surprisingly gentle temperaments, and their vigorous, muscular offspring.

Relaxing against Sweetheart's massive warmth, Hope listened to cattle suck cool water from the trough she had filled. Other cows came up and snuffled over her shirt as if to say hello. Then they moved off to bury their noses in the fragrant hay Mason had brought to the pasture earlier in the day.

Hope watched each cow, each calf. She knew them individually, their strengths and weaknesses, their quirks of temperament. She was alert for any signs of disease or injury, no matter how small.

There weren't any. With a wry smile she admitted that the cattle were in better shape than she was.

The wind stirred, shifted, blew more strongly.

Sweetheart turned and watched beyond the truck. Her blunt, furry ears were cocked forward, but she wasn't nervous.

Hope glanced over her shoulder and saw Rio walk-

ing toward her. Sweetheart mooed softly as she wandered over to the tall man. Hope saw the sudden flash of Rio's smile as he held out one hand and ran the other down the cow's neck. Sweetheart's long tongue curled out, swiped across his extended palm, and vanished.

When Rio walked up to Hope, the cow followed like a pet dog.

"What's your secret?" she asked.

"Salt," he admitted, grinning.

He shoved hard on the persistent cow's neck. She heaved a barn-sized sigh and ambled back to join the other Angus.

"Must be time to put out more salt licks," Hope said.

"I'll do it tomorrow."

"I can do it."

"I'm sure you can." He had seen her handle the heavy blocks of mineral salt once, and had promised himself he would take over that job.

"But you're going to do it anyway."

"How'd you guess?"

Laughing, she shook her head, pushed off her hat, and let it hang from its rawhide thong down her back. She shook out her hair and combed her fingers through it. She loved the feel of the wind lifting the heavy mass of hair away from her face.

Rio wondered if the sudden, hungry speeding of his pulse showed against his neck or temple. Deliberately he looked away from Hope's unintentional seduction and stared at the cattle instead.

"Good herd," he said after a moment or two. "One of the best I've ever seen."

"Thank you. I won't pretend I'm not proud of them. I bought some, culled calves, and raised the rest. They're my gift to the Valley of the Sun."

Rio's black eyebrows rose in surprise. To him, Hope was as unexpected as water in a stone desert. "Your family didn't raise Angus?"

"No, but Dad always wanted to. The first thing I bought him with my modeling money was Sweetheart. He didn't live to see her bred."

"You were a model?" Rio asked, surprised again.

Hope thought of the picture she must make—dirty boots and stained blue work shirt, faded jeans and a beat-up cowboy hat. She smiled crookedly. "Long ago, far away, in another country."

Not all that long or that far, Rio thought hungrily. He didn't say it aloud. He was trying not to look at her the way a man looks at a woman he wants. Badly.

Yet he couldn't always force himself to look away. His uncanny eyes had memorized the purity of Hope's profile, her shining hair, the womanly lift of her breasts, and the long, achingly lovely line of her legs.

He had known more beautiful women in his wanderings, women who could make men stop and stare in hunger and disbelief. He had never known a woman who called to his mind and senses the way Hope did. He wanted to talk with her, laugh with her, help her, protect her, stand close to the shimmering radiance of her dream.

And he wanted to touch her, to learn the hot, secret textures of her body, to know the sweet demands of her mouth and the heat of her response, to hear her cry out

his name when the pleasure he brought her consumed her to her soul.

Grimly Rio called himself a goddamned idiot.

Hope wasn't for him. His mind knew it, but his body was fighting that knowledge every bit of the way. All Hope had to do was breathe and he wanted her with a force that was different from anything he had ever known with another woman.

Despite the heat coiling in his gut, making him ache, Rio wouldn't make a move to touch Hope. He had nothing to give her but the well he wanted to find for her, for her dream. When he found it, when the dream was truth, then his brother the wind would call to him. And he would leave.

Hope deserved better than that.

He looked away from the woman he shouldn't touch and said quietly, "I'll bet you were good at it."

"Modeling?"

He nodded.

Hope smiled and dismissed her career with a wave of her hand. "I made a lot of money, but I wasn't an international cover girl, if that's what you mean."

"Did you want to be?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"All I ever wanted was the Valley of the Sun. After Mom and Julie died, I was free to come back home."

"You don't model anymore?"

Hope gave Rio a sideways glance out of hazel eyes that were haunted by shadows and lit by flecks of gold.

"No. When I'm in L.A. . . ." She shrugged. "I'm not a city girl. I can live there, but I don't like it."

"The money is good."

"That's why I stayed as long as I did. I had to pay off the inheritance taxes or sell the ranch. After I paid off the taxes, I worked until I thought I had enough money to keep the Valley of the Sun going while I built up the herds and put the ranch on a paying basis."

"Is there ever enough money on a ranch?" he asked dryly.

She gave him a bittersweet smile. "In some ways, I was as green as grass. I didn't know that there's no such animal as 'enough money' when you're talking about a desert ranch."

"Could you go back to modeling?"

"Could you live in a city?" she asked.

"I have."

"And now you don't."

Rio didn't answer. He didn't have to. He was here rather than in a city. So was she.

Hope looked at her beautiful black cattle and the brilliant currents of water welling silently up from the hose at the bottom of the tank.

"I could exist in the city," she said slowly, trying to make him understand what she barely understood herself. "I can only *live* here. This is my past, my present, my future. No matter where I live, the Valley of the Sun is the only home I'll ever have. I've always felt that way. I always will. The ranch is part of me."

He wanted to put his arms around Hope, to fold her gently against his body and hold her, to promise her

that he would find the well that would allow her to live forever on the land she loved.

But he couldn't do it. Not the holding. Not the promising.

As a child he had learned that promises were only words, and that the unspoken promise of a comforting hug could be the biggest lie of all.

Not that his parents had meant to be cruel. It just had turned out that way. They had been more interested in fleeing the Indian part of their heritage than they had been in anything else, even their black-haired son.

Silently Hope and Rio watched the cattle glisten blackly beneath the clear light of morning. The fact that it was Friday morning—and early morning at that—suddenly registered on Hope.

Rio shouldn't be on the Valley of the Sun. He should be at Turner's ranch.

"Did you finish with Turner's horses?" she asked.

"After a fashion."

She turned and looked at Rio, caught by something buried in his western drawl. "What does that mean?"

He smiled sardonically. "Turner gave me a choice—work for him at triple my present wages, or work for you full-time." Rio's drawl deepened. "I allowed as how I'd rather dig wells in bedrock with a toothpick than work for him."

"*Damn him,*" Hope said savagely, furious. Turner knew she couldn't afford to pay a hand full-time wages. He had counted on squeezing Rio, who needed a paying job. "I'll make it up to you somehow."

"Like hell you will," Rio said coolly, no drawl left. "Any problems I have with Turner are mine, not yours."

"Not this time. Turner doesn't want you working for me. He threatened to cut off my water unless I fired you."

Rio said something beneath his breath that Hope was just as glad not to quite hear.

"When?" he demanded.

"A little more than a week ago. It was just a bluff. I called it and that was the end of it."

"Well, that explains something."

"What?"

"Why Turner suddenly found twenty hours a day of work for me to do at his ranch. He was making sure I was too dog-tired to sweet-talk you into anything he wouldn't like."

"Too tired? He doesn't know you very well."

Rio gave her a sidelong glance. "You hinting that I'm a tomcat who's never too tired for a quick one?"

She laughed almost bitterly. "I'm saying you have better things to do than screw around with me."

"Turner says you're engaged to him."

Anger sent scarlet rising in Hope's cheeks. "He's lying."

Rio measured the truth and fury in her and nodded with a satisfaction he didn't show. "Is that why you're carrying a rifle in the water truck these days?"

She gave a casual, on-cue shrug that was worthy of her best modeling days. "Mason said there were a lot of snakes around the wells."

"Smart man," Rio said. Then with deadly calm he asked, "Did Turner make a try for you at his well?"

She looked at Rio's eyes and saw the promise of violence in their cold blue-black depths. She looked away and said nothing, not wanting to lie to him.

"Hope?" he asked softly.

"It wasn't anything serious," she said finally. "It just takes a while for the word *no* to sink into Turner's thick skull."

Rio hooked a thumb toward the heavy cast-iron pipe wrench that was propped against the truck's rear tire. "Try using that to drive home your point."

"I did."

He glanced sideways, saw that she meant it, and smiled like a wolf. Silently he added one more to the list of things he would do on the Valley of the Sun: if he had to leave the ranch for any reason, he would be certain that Hope wasn't alone.

Then Rio remembered that he wouldn't always be around to protect her.

Hope saw his sudden frown. "I have enough money to pay wages," she said. "Not as much as Turner, but—"

"No," Rio cut in. "Our deal hasn't changed. Room and board for me, range and a stud for my inares."

" 'For as long as the water flows.' "

He raked his hat from his head, holding on to the Stetson's dusty black curves with fingers that were weathered and lean. Eyes that were used to focusing on distant, wild places measured the surrounding lands. He didn't see whatever he was looking for. With

a disgusted word he replaced his hat and yanked on the rim.

“I have to find the damn stuff first.”

What Rio didn't say was that he had been looking. He had come up as dry as the land itself.

Ten



"A FEW DAYS ago some of the slopes got rain down toward Turner's ranch," Hope said, watching Rio from the corner of her eye, wondering why he looked so grim. "Maybe it will rain here. Anything would help."

Reluctantly Rio focused his attention on the sky instead of the water he sensed was somewhere beneath the dry land, waiting to be found, waiting as it had for a thousand thousand years. Squinting against the sun, he measured the day on an inner, instinctive scale he had learned to trust.

A haze had formed above the peaks. Within the haze, thicker streamers of clouds were condensing as he watched. Instead of being painfully clear or brassy with dust, the air had a silver shimmer to it.

Moisture.

Well, that's something, Rio thought. Not the end of the drought, but better than a kick in the butt with a dusty boot, which was all they had gotten up to now.

"Rain by tonight." His voice was deep and certain. "A decent rain. Not enough to bring up the water table a whole lot, but it should revive a few of the seeps."

Hope let out a sigh that was almost a groan.

He smiled slightly. "Don't let down yet. We're not off water-hauling duty. But for a week or so we'll only have to make one trip a day, twice at most. We'll have to start hauling feed, though."

"I'll do the hauling. I hired you to find a well, not to be a ranch hand."

"That's right," he said agreeably. "You didn't hire me. I volunteered."

"I can't let you—"

He cut off her words with a dark blue glance that told her he was every bit as determined as she was. He was bigger, too, with a masculine power she couldn't hope to match.

But Rio wasn't like John Turner. Rio would settle disagreements with words, not raw physical strength.

"If we share the water hauling, you'll have time to ride the land with me," he continued.

The words surprised Rio even as he spoke them. He had been doing his best not to be alone with Hope. Yet, as he heard his own words, he admitted to himself that she was a big part of the reason he had offered to find a new well for the Valley of the Sun. The thought of riding the land with Hope had flowed deeply beneath his offer, like artesian water beneath a layer of unyielding slate.

He couldn't be her lover, but he could share her dream for a time, filling the emptiness that had come

to him long ago, when he had stopped believing in his own dreams.

"I'll bet there are parts of the ranch that you've never seen," he said softly. "It's your land, Hope. Your future. Your dream. You should know every hard, beautiful inch of it."

Caught by his words, she looked at him with a longing she didn't know how to conceal or control. Like the land she loved, Rio could be grim and seductive by turns. His eyes were as deeply blue as twilight condensing into night. And like the night, he was alone.

She sensed very clearly the isolation in him, the darkness that lay beneath his smile, the long times of silence when he saw no one, heard nothing but the wind, and spoke only in the depths of his own mind. She felt a driving need to know the secrets hidden in his depths, the riches and sweetness that lay beneath a hard surface that no one had ever breached.

And because she wasn't a fool, she also wondered what dangers were waiting beneath his rugged surface, fault lines where reality could shift suddenly, crushing the unwary.

Yet danger, too, was part of why Hope loved the land. The Valley of the Sun accepted few people, and none of them easily. The children of the land knew how to survive. They also knew how to *live*, how to take a single moment and find in it an incandescent joy that few people ever knew.

The land had given her the incredible, silky coolness of water in the midst of drought. She had known the shimmering flash of light as the sun sank behind a

stark, blue-black ridge, and she had tasted the piñon-scented breeze that flowed out of canyon mouths when everywhere else the air was still. She had shared the terrible power and beauty of an eagle swooping down on its prey, and savored the lush, secret perfume of a night-blooming cactus.

And always, always, there was the land itself, a silent symphony in every tone of gold and brown, moonrise and night.

These were just a few of the moments of intense pleasure, of soul-deep awareness of being *alive*, that the Valley of the Sun gave to those who understood the land. Hope wanted to share those moments with Rio, and to discover what other moments he had found to share with her.

"Yes," she said quietly. "I'd like to ride the land with you."

Rio's midnight-blue eyes memorized Hope. He saw both the darkness and the light in her hazel glance. The darkness he understood.

The light fascinated him as much as it made him wary.

"I'll unload my gear at the house," he said neutrally. "If it's all right with you, I'll take the east bedroom upstairs. That way you and Mason won't feel like you have to tiptoe through my territory every time you use the back porch."

"Sounds good."

Hope ignored the flash of sensual awareness that came at the thought of Rio sleeping in the room next to hers. Even if he was sleeping on the floor in her bed-

room, she wouldn't have to lie awake waiting for him to crawl into bed with her. Not by so much as a gesture had he showed any real sexual interest in her.

He liked her, though. She was sure of it. Even Mason had noticed it. He said that he had never seen Rio smile so much as he did when Hope was around.

"You going to fill the Hope's tank next?" he asked, referring to her slowly failing well.

"Yes."

"I'll be ready."

"Have you eaten yet?" she asked.

He shrugged.

Hope looked at the level of the tank she was filling. "I'll be finished here in about twenty minutes. Breakfast in thirty-five."

"You don't have to make—"

"Better hustle," she said, cutting across his objection. "If your boots aren't under the table when the eggs are finished, I'll feed every bit of your food to the pigs we don't have. That would be a terrible waste of fresh eggs."

His smile flashed, a hard curve of white against his dark face. He touched his hat brim in a brief salute. "Yes, *ma'am*," he drawled, his tone both soft and suitably awed.

She tried not to smile at his gentle teasing and ended up laughing out loud. Rio's response was that of a polite, slightly backward boy, yet he radiated a seasoned masculinity that was as unmistakable as it was fascinating. It was impossible not to be amused by the difference between the bashful words and the confident reality of the man.

He saw her struggle not to smile, heard her laughter, and winked at her just before he turned to go back to the house.

He didn't know who was more surprised by the wink, Hope or himself. He couldn't remember the last time he had felt so lighthearted, as if the day ahead was full of new places and possibilities to explore. There was something revitalizing about being in the presence of Hope, whether it was the woman or the simple fact of hope itself.

The memory of Rio's teasing kept Hope's mood light even when the brass coupling on the hose proved unusually stubborn. She whacked it apart with the heavy wrench, put everything back in its proper place, and drove the truck out of the pasture.

After she washed up outside, she let herself into the kitchen through the back porch. A single glance told her that Rio hadn't taken any chances on missing breakfast. He had set a place for himself—plate, silverware, coffee mug, napkin.

And his boots were tucked neatly under the table.

Hope laughed, feeling like a teenager again. She had expected many things after hearing Mason's description of Rio, but a dry sense of the ridiculous wasn't one of them.

Still smiling, she lit the oven, turned it as low as it would go, and put Rio's plate and a big platter inside. With no wasted motions, she took thick slices of bacon out of the refrigerator and draped them in a heavy cast-iron pan to cook. While the bacon sizzled she cut up potatoes into another black pan to fry.

When the bacon and potatoes were crisp and ready, she moved them onto the platter and tucked it into the oven again. Four slices of bread disappeared into the toaster. They popped up after a minute, transformed into crunchy brown squares. She buttered the toast and stashed it in the oven to stay warm.

As soon as she heard Rio's soft footsteps on the stairs, she reached up to the open cupboard shelf where she kept fresh eggs in an unglazed pottery bowl. When she brought the bowl down to eye level, she made a sound of surprise. A scattering of golden blossoms were tucked among the smooth, creamy curves of the eggs. The tiny wildflowers had bloomed out of season following a desert shower.

Rio must have picked the flowers on his way off of Turner's ranch. It was the only place around that had known rain in months.

The scent of the flowers was a delicate caress and a silent promise of life renewing itself despite the harshest drought. She closed her eyes and breathed deeply, filling herself with both the fragrance and the promise.

Emotion twisted through Rio as he watched Hope from the doorway. He would have given away everything he owned for the right to hold her, to inhale her promise as deeply as she was breathing in the fragrance of flowers.

But to do that would be to make promises of his own, promises he couldn't keep. *Brother-to-the-wind*.

When Hope opened her eyes, she saw Rio watching her with an expression that was close to hunger and

even closer to regret. She smiled at him, wishing that he wasn't a temporary kind of man, wanting him anyway, wanting him even though she knew that he wouldn't take her.

She didn't know that her smile was an echo of his own expression, hunger and regret mingling into a yearning too deep for words.

"Thank you," she said huskily.

He watched her fingertip stroke a soft petal. He wished that it was his skin being touched so gently by her.

"My grandmother called them rain flowers," he said. His voice was almost rough with the beat of his blood, his hunger, the rushing need he refused to give in to. "She said they were the only gold that mattered in this land."

"What did your grandfather call them?" Hope asked, remembering Mason saying that one of Rio's grandfathers had been a Zuni shaman.

Rio's eyes narrowed as he tried to remember rituals from deep in his past. Slowly knowledge condensed like clouds across an inner sky, bringing a rain of childhood memories. The soft golden blossoms were medicine flowers, revered for their survival in the face of the harshest conditions.

Softly he spoke in phrases that had odd rhythms, ritual intonations, sacred sounds from a time and a place and a culture that had never been truly his, for his only culture and solace was the land.

He didn't translate the words into English for Hope. There was no translation that anyone would under-

stand. His grandfather's spiritual center had been a blending of Zuni and Navajo, Apache and missionary Christian rituals. It had worked for his grandfather in ways that Rio understood but couldn't explain, one man's balancing of the ageless animism of Indian heritage with the overwhelming reality of modern European man.

"There's no real translation for the flower's name," Rio said. Then, softly, he added, "I've always called these flowers *hope*, for they bloom at times and in places where nothing else can survive."

Silence stretched between Hope and Rio, a silence that shivered with unspoken words and hungers. As she looked away from the midnight-blue depths of his eyes, she realized that for the first time in her life she wanted a man, truly wanted him.

And then she knew it was deeper than mere wanting. It was *need*, a raw emptiness that she had never known before. The thought of not having Rio, of never having him, was a pain so intense she had to fight back a cry of protest.

Hope's hands trembled as she filled a shallow earthenware saucer with a thin layer of water. Carefully she picked the small blossoms out of the bowl of eggs and floated the flowers on the transparent shimmer of liquid. She placed the saucer gently on the table between her place and Rio's.

The blossoms shivered with each movement of the water, as though they were alive and taking quick, tiny breaths.

"How do you like your eggs?" she asked, her voice

husky with all the things she wanted to say, and knew she shouldn't.

"Over easy."

Rio reached past Hope to pick up the huge black coffeepot that was warming on the back of the stove. His arm brushed over hers. It was an accident, but the brief sliding contact sent heat surging through him. He remembered the instant weeks ago when her breasts had pressed against him while she wrestled with the stubborn coupling on the canvas hose. The tactile memory was as clear and hot as the flame burning beneath the cast-iron pan.

The intensity of his response to a memory and a casual touch both surprised and unsettled him. Nothing had gotten underneath his skin like this for a long, long time.

He had thought that nothing could.

None of his turmoil showed in his face as he poured himself a cup of strong coffee. Life had taught him to show no more expression than that of an eagle arrowing out of the sky to claim its prey.

As he replaced the coffeepot, Hope reached for an egg. Her hand bumped into his arm. She felt resilience, heat, and strength as his biceps shifted beneath her fingers. The temptation to prolong the contact by running her palm over his arm almost overwhelmed her. She wanted to feel the warm satin of his flesh, the flex of his strength, the heat of his life beneath her palm.

The intensity of her need to touch him shocked her. She snatched back her hand as though she had touched burning metal.

"Excuse me," she said quickly. "How many eggs do you want?"

"Four."

His voice was absent. He was watching the very fine trembling of her fingers as she blindly reached for an egg. The evidence of her response to a casual touch set off a soundless explosion of hunger deep inside him that he could neither control nor deny.

Angry, needing, yearning, he watched her over the rim of his steaming coffee mug. A lock of her bittersweet-chocolate hair had crept free of the clip at her nape. The tendril of hair slid forward to curl softly against her neck.

He wanted to capture the dark curl in his fingers, to lift it to his lips, and then to kiss the golden skin of her unclothed neck.

Rio didn't know how desperately he wanted it until he saw his own hand reaching for the silky curl of hair. Cursing silently, he made his fingers into a fist and he turned his back on Hope's endless, innocent temptations.

As he pulled out a chair to sit down at the table, he saw his boots beneath and remembered Hope's delicious laughter floating up the stairway when she discovered the empty boots. He looked back at her silently cooking his breakfast and he . . . *hungered*. Automatically he kicked his stocking feet into the cowboy boots and adjusted his pant legs.

Then he realized he hadn't stopped watching the delicate curve of her neck, hadn't stopped wanting to taste her skin, hadn't stopped needing her in ways that

shocked him even more than the unruly, insistent beat of his arousal. The direct response of a teenage boy combined with the complex needs of an adult male swept over him like wind over the open land.

And like the land, he had no defenses, only emptiness.

Grimly he reined his thoughts. There was only one way he could touch Hope that wouldn't destroy both of them, and that was by finding water for her, fulfilling her dream. It had always been enough for him in the past. It would have to be enough now. He had no more to give her except emptiness and pain.

"I've been looking over the papers your last hydrologist left," Rio said. He sipped at the hot coffee and added dryly, "Educated man, no doubt about it. But he didn't know a hell of a lot about this country on a first-hand basis."

"He was just out of school." Hope turned eggs with easy motions of her wrist. "City boy through and through. Nice kid. Earnest and real sorry there wasn't any water on my ranch."

Hope slid the eggs onto Rio's warm plate and retrieved the platter with its load of bacon, potatoes, and toast. She put it all in front of him. After adding honey and a jar of cherry preserves to the table, she left him to eat in peace.

Silently she poured herself a cup of coffee and began making sandwiches for lunch on the trail. Between sips of coffee she deftly assembled slices of beef and slabs of yeasty homemade bread. Several apples, plus a double handful of oatmeal and raisin

cookies, joined the growing heap of food on the counter.

When it was all tightly wrapped and ready to go, she poured herself some more coffee and sat opposite Rio, not at all bothered by his silence. She had grown up around ranch men. Their work was hard and endless. No one had time for conversation until after his belly was full. Then the men would lean back and talk until their food settled or their consciences got the better of them and prodded them back to work once more.

Rio sensed Hope's relaxation and relaxed completely himself, grateful for her acceptance of silence. It left him free to savor each bite of the crisp fried potatoes, country bacon, homemade bread, and perfectly cooked eggs. He ate every bit of breakfast, mopped his plate neatly with a last crust of toast, and sighed with real pleasure.

"I'll take my wages in your cooking any day," he said, meaning every word.

She shrugged and smiled slightly. She had been raised cooking. She had always loved it, the colors and the textures and the smells, the pure sensual reward of creating a good meal. Her mother and older sister had never understood how she felt. To them, the kitchen was a punishment for being born female on a ranch.

"It's hard to go wrong cooking breakfast when you have fresh eggs in the cupboard and your neighbor's best pig in the freezer," Hope said.

Rio made a sound of disgust. "Tell that to the hundred bunkhouse cooks I've known."

Her smile widened. "That's how I learned. The

hands threw the cook in the corral trough and threatened to quit. I was only ten, but I'd been cooking since I was seven."

"What about your mother?"

"She hated cooking."

Rio heard more than the words. He heard the sadness and the acceptance and the loss that never went away but simply became part of life. He understood those things, and respected the fact that Hope faced what life gave her with a smile and the quiet strength that came from accepting what would never change.

"Did you spend much time in the drink?" Rio asked, smiling in spite of his thoughts. The image of a young Hope dumped into the horse trough was beguiling. She would have taken it with a splash and a smile, pulled herself out, and dripped all over the nearest cowboy.

"Just once. Thank God it was summer. The dunking felt real good."

"What did you do to earn the trough?"

"I made chocolate cake, but I mixed up the sugar and the salt. It was so awful even the dog wouldn't eat it."

Rio threw back his head and laughed.

The deep sound was as much a reward to Hope as his enjoyment of breakfast had been. She laughed softly with him, shaking her head at the memory of her mistake.

"Even today when I make a chocolate cake, Mason takes a very tiny first bite," she admitted. She smiled into her coffee cup. "Nothing obvious, mind you. Just

a cautious little taste to make sure the sugar and the salt didn't get swapped around."

"I'll remember that."

He drained his coffee cup with a long swallow, then stood up with a smooth determination that Hope remembered from her childhood. *Man of the house, fed and ready to go back to work.*

The thought of what it would be like to have Rio as the man of her house leaped into her mind, burning with an intensity that stopped her heart. She forced herself to breathe, to push the idea of Rio aside, to ignore it. Impossible dreams had killed her mother and her sister. Hope had vowed that they wouldn't kill her.

She didn't have the strength or the emotion to spare for destructive dreaming. She knew it as surely as she knew that the man called Rio was as rootless as the wind keening across the land, always searching for something, never finding it, always moving on.

She hadn't needed Mason to tell her. It was there in Rio's eyes, in his silences, in his memories of a hundred bunkhouse cooks.

Rio's long fingers tightened around his coffee mug as he saw darkness veil the humor that had made Hope's eyes brilliant just a moment before. He wondered what memory or fear had come to her, stealing her laughter.

Suddenly, savagely, he wanted to know what haunted her. Then he wanted to smooth the downward curve of regret from her mouth with his own lips. But if he did, in the end they both would have more regrets, more sadness, the unending bitterness of betrayal.

She couldn't leave the Valley of the Sun.

He couldn't stay.

Brother-to-the-wind.

For the first time, Rio understood the tears in his grandfather's eyes when he told his grandson his true name.

Eleven



AFTER BREAKFAST, Hope and Rio walked beneath an empty, cloudless sky to the horse pasture just beyond the barn. The lunch she had just packed was in the saddlebags over his shoulder. So was a canteen of coffee. It would lose its heat soon enough, but people who worked the land learned to take coffee at whatever temperature they could get it.

“Where do you want to start?” Hope asked.

“We’ll ride the boundaries first.”

“High or low?”

He gestured toward the Perdidas rising in stark grandeur above the rumpled land. “Up there at the northern end of the ranch.”

“Then you better take a good horse,” she said. “The Valley of the Sun goes as low as two thousand feet here in the south and as high as seven up along the northern boundaries.”

"You have timberland?" Surprise was clear in Rio's voice and in the dark line of his eyebrows.

She gave him a wry, sideways glance. "Timberland? Are you kidding? If it's a tree, it's on government-lease land. The part of the ranch that's above seven thousand feet is all on northwest-facing slopes."

"Northwest facing," he repeated, shaking his head. "That means nothing grows but big sage, mountain mahogany, piñon, and juniper."

"You got it. Not a decent board foot in the lot."

His mouth turned down in a sardonic curl. "It's the same way all over Nevada. The best land is government, the worst is Indian, and the rest of the Basin and Range country belongs to anyone tough and smart enough to hammer a living out of it."

"But it's beautiful land," Hope said.

"Most people don't think so. They look at the sagebrush and the bare mountains and they can't drive through the state fast enough. Maybe you have to be born here to appreciate it."

"My mother was born here. She hated it."

"So did mine," Rio admitted. "Being raised on a reservation was no treat for anyone, especially a part-Indian girl who looked like she got off at the wrong bus stop. She couldn't get off the res fast enough."

"Did your father like it?"

Rio made a sound that could have been laughter, but was too hard. "He hated this land more than she did. He was part Athabascan, born to northern forests and lakes. He hated them, too. But most of all he hated

being called Indian when his father was a renegade Scotsman and his mother was a quarter Dutch."

Hope glanced sideways at Rio. She wondered if his father had been like him, strong bones and easy strength, raven-black hair and quick mind, silences as deep as the night.

He hated being called Indian.

She wondered if Rio did.

As though hearing her silent question, Rio moved his wide shoulders in a casual shrug that belied the dark memories in his eyes. "My father never grew up. He never accepted the fact that there's no such thing as mostly white. People look at you and see only *not* white."

There was a cynicism in Rio's words that made Hope ache. She wanted to say he was wrong. She knew he was right.

But not when it came to her. "When I look at you," she said calmly, "I see a man. A good one. Period."

He glanced quickly aside at Hope. Her voice was like her expression, matter-of-fact. He could take it or leave it, but it wouldn't change the truth of how she saw the world.

How she saw him.

Without knowing what he was doing, he lifted his hand to touch her cheek. Before he could, a drumroll of approaching hooves drew his attention away from Hope.

Storm Walker was cantering toward the fence, making rhythmic thunder roll from his dark hooves. In the center of the pasture, two of Hope's four remaining

mares watched the Appaloosa stallion rush to meet the humans.

The stud was worth watching. Black except for a white stocking and the black-spotted white "blanket" that covered his powerful rump, Storm Walker moved with a muscular grace that made Rio want to climb on the strong black back and ride forever.

With a horseman's knowing, appreciative eye, he watched the stallion mince up to the fence and nicker a greeting. Quietly he stroked Storm Walker's warm, glossy neck.

Neither the man nor the stud was wary of the other. They had made friends the first time Rio leaned against the fence and talked Storm Walker over to him in low, soothing tones. Since then Rio had come to the horse pasture at least once a day, bringing a reassuring touch, a sprinkle of salt, and an admiration that grew every time the stallion moved over the ground with long, liquid strides.

Storm Walker blew on Rio's hat and shirt collar. Smiling, he pushed away the velvety muzzle.

"You're an old softie, aren't you," he said in a low voice.

Hope snorted. "Only until you get in the saddle. Then he'll shake the change right out of your pockets."

"Rough-gaited?" Rio asked, surprised. "He sure doesn't look it."

"Oh, once he settles down he's as smooth as deep water." She paused, then added dryly, "But settling this bad boy down is a bone-shaking proposition, kind of like riding a landslide. He needs a lot more work than

he's gotten lately. He's spring-loaded and looking for fun."

"Hauling water hasn't left you any time to give him exercise," Rio said, understanding.

"Even if I had time, I can't risk getting thrown. If I break an arm or a leg trying to settle Storm Walker down, I'd have to sell my cattle or let them die of thirst." She shrugged. "My prancing bad boy will just have to wait until the rains come. Then I'll ride his spotted tail right into the ground."

Rio's smile faded at the thought of Hope climbing up on the big stud and being bucked off into a corral fence. Not that he thought she was a bad rider. He knew she wasn't. When he had put her up on Dusk, Hope had been as graceful and confident in the saddle as she was on the ground.

But Storm Walker was big, hard, and had a stallion's aggressive temperament.

"Is he a good rough-country horse?" Rio asked.

"He was born in the foothills east of here and ran free for the first three years of his life."

"Like Dusk. She lived wild until two years ago."

"Did you catch her?"

He nodded. "She led me on one hell of a chase, too." His eyes focused on an inner landscape of memory. "Her mama was a ranch horse gone wild, an Arab-quarter horse mix that was tougher than an old boot. Her daddy was part Morgan, part Arab, and ninety percent cougar, near as I could tell."

Hope remembered how her father had hated it when the wild horse herds grew beyond the land's ability to

renew itself and still feed the herds. Then the meat hunters would come, chasing the wild horses with airplanes and driving them lathered and terrified into funnel-shaped corrals concealed by brush.

The hunts had been necessary to cull the herds back from the brink of starvation and to return feral horses to their owners. Necessary, but brutal. The alternative—starvation, disease, and a lingering death—was even more brutal.

Hope sighed. "How did you catch Dusk? Airplane?"

"I used the oldest method, the one the Indians invented centuries ago, when the Spanish horses were so new to America that the Cheyenne called them 'big dogs.' "

She smiled. "What method is that?"

"I walked Dusk down."

Turning, Hope stared at Rio. Mason had told her of men walking down wild horses more than a century ago. They followed the wild herds from water hole to water hole, never allowing them to rest. At first the horses ran at the sight and smell of man. Then they cantered. Then they trotted. Then they walked. Finally they were too tired to move at all.

It, too, could be a brutal method of capture, but at least it was almost as hard on the men as it was on the horses.

"It wasn't that bad," Rio said, understanding the expression on Hope's face. "I wore out Dusk's flight response as much as her feet. I just hung around the fringes of the herd, leaving bits of salt and grain, following the mustangs everywhere until I kind of grew

on her. By the time I walked up to her with a rope, she simply wasn't afraid of me anymore. I was a member of the herd." He grinned suddenly. "A strange, slow, small, awkward kind of horse, but one of the herd just the same."

"How long did it take you?"

"Eight weeks. Ten. Maybe more. I lost track of time. This country's good for that."

"Losing track of time?"

Rio nodded absently. His attention was once again on the glossy Appaloosa stallion. "Mind if I ride him today?"

"Only if you break something," Hope said wryly.

"I wouldn't hurt a hair on his spotted hide."

"It wasn't Storm Walker's hide I was worried about," she retorted. "He's only been ridden a few times in the last year."

"He looks it. Just full of himself, isn't he? Don't worry, we'll do fine together."

Hope smiled. "Forget I said anything, just like I forgot that you make your living as a horse trainer when you aren't drilling wells for dirt-poor dreamers."

He looked at her, curious about the complex emotions in her voice when she described herself as a dirt-poor dreamer.

"I'd love for you to ride Storm Walker," she said. "The longer he goes without work, the harder he'll be for me to handle. And he never was easy. Not for the first few minutes, anyway."

Rio didn't waste any more time talking about it. He flipped the saddlebags he was carrying over the corral

rail and went after Storm Walker. He had the stallion caught, curried, bridled, saddled, and inside the corral before Hope could change her mind.

Storm Walker knew what was coming. He was dancing and snorting, bristling with energy and eager for some fun.

"You sure you want to ride him?" she asked Rio. "You don't have to. I need a well more than I need a well-behaved stud."

Rio grinned like a boy. "You're doing me a favor. I've wanted to climb on Storm Walker since the first time I saw his glossy hide across the pasture."

"Okay, but don't say I didn't warn you." With one hand wrapped around the bridle just above the bit, she held the stallion still for Rio to mount. "Tell me when you're ready."

Rio gathered the reins tightly and sprang into the saddle with catlike ease. His feet settled into the stirrups as Storm Walker's body bunched into a hard knot of protest.

"Turn him loose," Rio said softly.

Expecting Storm Walker to explode, Hope let go of the bridle and climbed the corral fence in two seconds flat.

Rio didn't allow the stallion to buck. He held the horse's head up and let him fight a useless battle with the bit. The stud's powerful hindquarters rippled as he alternately lashed out with his heels and spun on his hocks. Sudden spins and jerks were the only way he could try to unload his rider, short of scraping Rio off on the fence or

rolling over on him. Storm Walker was basically too good-tempered a horse to resort to those tactics.

Bucking, on the other hand, was just good clean fun.

Smiling slightly, Hope watched the man and the horse test each other, probing for weaknesses. Storm Walker backed up constantly, as though to say if he couldn't buck, he wasn't going to go forward, either. Rio's long, powerful legs closed around the stud's black barrel, urging him forward with relentless pressure. Rio could have used the small, blunt spurs he always wore on his boots, but he didn't.

After a few backward circuits of the corral, Storm Walker stood still and chewed the bit resentfully.

"Round one to you," Hope said.

Rio glanced sideways and said dryly, "Something tells me I can either let this son buck here or I can let him buck out there when my mind is on something else."

"You've got it. Storm Walker just won't settle down until he's had his fun."

"Yeah, I was afraid of that. Had a horse like him once."

"What happened to it?"

"I swapped it for a dog and shot the dog," Rio drawled. "Course, it was a gelding and ugly as sin."

She laughed, not believing a word of it.

With a sigh Rio tugged his hat down hard, eased his grip on the reins, and touched Storm Walker lightly with his spurs. The stud's head shot down, his heels shot up, and for the next few minutes he did his best to

turn inside out. Rio rode the whirlwind with a skill that made it look easy.

Hope wasn't fooled. She had ridden that same whirlwind more than once. She knew there was nothing easy about Storm Walker working off a head of steam.

After the first few moments she let out her breath, confident that neither horse nor man would be hurt. She relaxed on the top railing, hooked her feet around the next railing down, and simply enjoyed the man and the stallion as they tore up the corral, two healthy animals perfectly matched, enjoying the test of power against skill.

Without warning, Storm Walker's head came up. He snorted deeply, then pricked his ears and looked over his shoulder at the man who hadn't come unstuck.

"Finished?" Rio drawled.

Storm Walker rubbed his nose on Rio's boot and then stood as placidly as a cow, waiting for instructions from his rider.

"That's it," Hope said, jumping down from the fence. "He won't buck again this ride."

"Thank God for small favors."

Rio stretched his back and shoulders, feeling the stallion's unleashed power in every muscle of his body. Then he looked at Hope's slender form and wondered how she had managed to stay on top of Storm Walker. It wasn't raw strength, that was for sure.

"My hat's off to you," Rio said simply. "You must be one hell of a rider."

Hope grinned. "I've eaten my share of dirt. And that spotted stud fed me most of it."

He chuckled and shook his head, enjoying her matter-of-fact acceptance of getting thrown. At the same time he quietly promised himself that if Storm Walker unloaded anyone for a while, it would be him. There was just a whole lot of power in that stud's spotted body. He could hurt a rider and never mean to.

"Want to ride Dusk," Rio asked, "or does one of your mares need work?"

"I'll ride Aces. She's Storm Walker's favorite. He'll be less anxious to get home if she's along."

Rio moved to dismount, then stopped and looked dubiously at Storm Walker.

Hope hid her smile. "Don't worry. You're okay as long as you don't take off the saddle. That's how Storm Walker knows a ride is finished—when the saddle comes off."

"One bucking session per saddling, huh?"

"That's it."

"Makes a man consider the joys of sleeping in the saddle," he said dryly.

Hope stopped trying to hide her amusement. She leaned against Storm Walker and let laughter bubble up like pure spring water. It had been a long time since she had simply given herself to any emotion except determination. When the last laughter finally rippled into silence, she took a deep breath and looked up at Rio.

"You're good for me," she said, her lips still curving in a deep smile.

"Keep you from breaking your neck?" he guessed.

"No. You teach me to laugh again. I'd almost forgotten how."

Her words sank into Rio like water into thirsty land, renewing him. Without stopping to think, he smiled gently and touched her cheek with his fingertips.

"It's you who teach me," he said, his voice warm and deep.

"What?" she whispered.

"Beautiful dreamer," he said softly. "You don't know, do you? You don't know what your dreams do to me. And your laughter."

Abruptly he closed his eyes, shutting out the vision of Hope watching him, eyes luminous with dreams, deep with promises that shouldn't be made and couldn't be kept. The fingers that had touched her so gently retreated and clenched into a fist on his thigh.

"I wish to Christ I was a different kind of man," he said bitterly.

"I don't." She trembled from his brief touch and from the savage emotions that had made his voice harsh. "I wouldn't change you any more than I would trade the Valley of the Sun for the green Perdidas. I was made for this land, Rio."

And I'm afraid I was made for you, too.

She didn't say the words aloud. She didn't have to. He heard them clearly in his own mind, as clearly as though he had spoken them himself.

And then he was afraid that he had.

Twelve



SITTING ASTRIDE STORM WALKER, Rio didn't open his eyes again until he sensed Hope moving away. Brooding, he watched her go to the horse pasture. A clear whistle floated through the air. One of the horses whickered and trotted over to her. Like Storm Walker, the mare's stride was leggy and elegant.

A minute later, using nothing more than her fingers twisted lightly into the slate-colored mane, Hope led the dark gray mare into the corral where Storm Walker and Rio waited. The mare was big, clean-limbed, and powerful. She moved with the calm assurance of a domestic animal that had never been mistreated.

Hope shut the corral gate behind Aces and went into the barn. She returned almost immediately with a saddle, blanket, bridle, and a bucket of grooming tools.

Rio dismounted as smoothly as he had gone into the saddle in the first place. One-handed, he took Aces'

saddle from Hope and flipped it expertly over the top rail of the corral. The blanket followed.

Together, working in silence, they groomed the mare. Before Hope could, Rio checked the mare's steel shoes carefully, knowing they would be going over some rugged, stony land. He checked the saddle cinch with equal care, looking for any weakness that could make the strap give way at the very instant it was most needed. A fall in rough country could easily be fatal.

While Hope watched, bemused at having the familiar tasks taken from her hands, Rio saddled Aces with the same automatic ease that he had done everything else. He had spent his life around horses. It showed in every smooth motion he made.

When Aces was ready, Rio pulled his oversized saddlebags off the corral rail and tied them in place behind Storm Walker's saddle. Not quite trusting the stallion to behave, he mounted in a single catlike motion. If the stud bucked, Rio would be ready.

As though the thought of bucking had never crossed his well-bred mind, the stallion turned eagerly toward the corral gate. With a wry smile at his own expense, Rio opened the wooden gate, let the horses out, and then refastened the gate without getting out of the saddle.

"How did the last hydrologist get around?" he asked.

"Truck," Hope said succinctly,

Beneath the shield of hat brim and eyelashes, she glanced aside at Rio. The harsh lines on his face had relaxed and his voice was calm, neutral, wholly con-

trolled. It was as though he had never touched her, never regretted the kind of man he was, never heard her response, never shut her out so finally behind his closed eyes.

But he had done all of those things.

Hope turned Aces onto a dirt ranch road that went a short way into the foothills.

Rio followed. "Just a truck? He must have missed a lot of your land."

"He had a fistful of survey maps."

"Good thing, maps. Save a man a lot of saddle and boot leather. Not worth much for finding wells, though."

She let out a long breath. "That's what I hoped. I just don't see how he could spread out a piece of paper on the kitchen table and then tell me that if there was any artesian water on my ranch, it was three miles down and hotter than hell."

Rio's mouth turned in a sardonic curve that was a long way from his earlier smiles. "He was half-right. Three miles down it is hotter than hell."

With a light touch of spurs, he lifted Storm Walker into a lope on the dirt road. He held that pace until the horses began to breathe deeply and their coats took on a satin sheen that was just short of sweat. Then he alternated between a trot and a lope, eating up the miles without wearing down the horses.

When he reined Storm Walker back down to a walk, Aces was still alongside, her gunmetal legs easily keeping pace with the more powerful stallion. Rio nodded approvingly.

"Good animal," he said.

Hope smiled. "Thanks. I picked her out when she was two days old."

"You have a good eye."

"Right now I'd rather have a good well."

"If it's here to find, you'll get it. According to my map, the road ends two miles up from here. Is there a trail to the ranch boundary?"

"The road ends a mile up," she corrected. "Land-slide."

He smiled slightly. "That's the problem with maps. The land keeps changing."

"There's a trail to Piñon Camp. Dad used to hunt deer there. That's only a few hundred yards from the ranch boundary, I think." She shrugged. "Close enough. It's hard to tell without an expensive, full-blown formal survey."

"It's hard to tell with one," Rio said wryly. "Sometimes it seems like each new surveyor has a new opinion. Besides, a surprising amount of the Basin and Range country has never been surveyed. Hell, it's hardly even been settled. Two or three cities and a whole lot of sagebrush and mountains in between."

"That's why I love it. Plenty of room to just . . . *be*."

"Yes," he said. "A lot of people don't understand that."

"Good. Leaves more room for the rest of us."

Smiling, Rio looked down at the road. There hadn't been enough rain to wipe out the tracks of the last vehicle to pass over the gritty surface. In places that were protected from the wind, tire marks still showed

clearly. He noted that the tread patterns weren't those of either ranch truck.

"Hunters?" he asked, gesturing toward the tire tracks.

"The hydrologist. He came up here to get an overview of the whole ranch."

"Well, at least he wasn't entirely a fool. That's one of the things we're going to do."

The hydrologist's tire tracks went up to the landslide, stopped, crossed over themselves, and headed back down the mountain. Rio guided Storm Walker carefully around the tracks, looking for boot marks or any other sign that the hydrologist had gotten out of his truck and walked around.

There weren't any tracks.

Rio turned in the saddle and looked back over the trail. The road had climbed steeply in the last mile. There was a clear view of the tiny ranch buildings, the low desert basin beyond, and the next mountain range beyond that.

"This is as far as he went," Hope said. "I told him that Piñon Camp had a better view. He said he could see more than enough from here."

She looked beyond the landslide to the Perdidas rising darkly above the dry foothills. Then she turned as Rio had, toward the west.

The ranch boundaries sprawled invisibly along the rugged foothills like a carelessly thrown blanket. The basin between the Perdidas and the next mountain range fifteen miles to the west was low desert, a place of alkali flats in the summer and temporary, brackish

lakes during the season of winter rain and mountain runoff.

The foothills were rugged, but not as steep as the east-facing foothills of the Perdidas. Small valleys thick with grass lay in the creases of the hills, guarded by rocky ridges where big sage and piñon and mahogany grew nearly twenty feet tall. They were shrubs rather than true trees, but so tall they were often called pygmy forests.

The endless changes of elevation fascinated Hope, basins alternating with mountain ranges that looked like tawny velvet waves frozen forever in the moment of breaking. A thin silver haze of heat shimmered above the basins, blending invisibly into the blue-white haze of extreme distance. There was nothing to stop the eye but range after range of mountains falling away to the far curve of the earth.

"How much do you know about the geological history of this land?" Rio asked quietly.

"Not much more than the name 'Basin and Range,' and that's self-explanatory," she said, gesturing toward the view. "Basin followed by mountain range followed by basin, world without end."

His clear eyes narrowed slightly as he focused on the distant horizon. *World without end.*

"You live in a rare place, Hope. It's almost unique on earth. Its closest cousins are the Baikal region of Siberia and the African Rift Valley. Those are places where the crust of the earth is being stretched by the force of molten basalt pressing up from below, literally tearing the continent apart. The crust thins and breaks apart under the pressure in a process called rifting."

Hope turned toward Rio, drawn by the near-reverence in his deep voice.

"In Africa the process has gone so far that parts of the rift are below sea level, just waiting for the south end of the rift to split the edge of the African continent and let in the ocean. Then a new sea will be born. Like the Red Sea, where the Arabian peninsula slowly split away from Africa and salt water bled into the gap, concealing the rift."

He watched the horizon for a moment longer, but his eyes saw only the compelling, massive, surpassingly slow movements of continental plates over spans of time so immense that they could only be named, not understood. Geological time. Deep time.

"A similar kind of crustal spreading is happening all the way down the center of the Atlantic Ocean," he added.

Just listening to Rio made Hope ache with all that couldn't be. His words were alive with a subtle excitement, the voice of a man who saw things few other people could, a man who was intellectually, spiritually, and sensually alive to the world around him.

"I'll show you maps of it tonight," he said. "The Atlantic rift is really something, all the frozen ridges of basalt and the flat intermediary basins being pushed east and west from a great central seam at the bottom of the ocean."

"I'd like to see that."

Slowly Rio's focus returned to the rugged land in front of him instead of the images in his mind. "The Basin and Range country is pulling itself apart, just like the Atlantic. Basalt wells up deep below the sur-

face, fracturing the crust in thousands of fault zones. Some of the land rises along the faults, some drops, and then huge blocks of land tilt up and back like a dog pushing up on its haunches after sleeping in the sun."

Hope smiled at the image of blocks of land changing positions like a pack of great, shaggy dogs.

"That's what makes our mountain ranges," he said. "The tilting. Look over there. See it?"

She followed his glance from the Perdidas to the distant basin shimmering with heat.

"Tilting is why the west side of the mountains isn't as steep as the east side," he explained. "The uplift is sharper on the east face of the blocks. If you look with your mind as well as your eyes, you can see the blocks of land shearing apart, rocking back, rising, mountains growing up into the sky. And the higher the mountains go, the more clouds are combed out of the sky, and the less rain falls on the eastern side. The dry side."

"Valley of the Sun."

"Yes. And a lot of other valleys. That's where part of your water problem comes from. The Basin and Range country is in the rain shadow of the Sierra Nevada mountains. Young mountains, tall and growing taller. They block the clouds coming off the Pacific Ocean, milk them, and very little rain escapes to the other side. It's as though the mountains cast a shadow where it rarely rains."

He shifted slightly in the saddle, putting his palm flat on the saddle horn, and studied the land he sensed in his soul as much as saw with his eyes.

"Okay, living in a rain shadow is part of my problem," Hope said. "What's the rest?"

"There just isn't as much water in the atmosphere as there used to be," he said simply. "We're in a dry cycle. And I don't mean only the last few decades or generations. A hundred thousand years ago, if we looked over the Basin and Range country, we would have seen water, not sagebrush."

At first she thought Rio was joking. A look at his face told her that he wasn't. He was watching the land with eyes that saw through the surface of reality to the shifting forces beneath—shaman's eyes, darker than twilight, as hypnotic as his voice sinking into her, wrapping her in visions of an earth she had never dreamed.

"A lot of little lakes and two big ones covered this land," he said. "One of the lakes was nearly nine thousand square miles of water. The other was twenty thousand square miles." As though he was remembering, his eyes looked inward. "They were deep lakes. Hundreds of feet deep. They filled the rift in the land where the crust was being pulled apart."

"How? Was there really that much more rain back then?"

"Partly it was more rain. Mostly it was runoff and meltwater from the Sierras. The mountains got a lot more rain and snow then. Rivers that only run part of the time now were a year-round torrent racing down to fill the crustal rift."

"What about evaporation? Why didn't the runoff lakes dry up then the way they do now?"

"It wasn't as hot, which meant less evaporation. The water that came to the Great Basin stayed and created lakes. Men lived along the lakes, fished there, explored island mountain peaks covered with pines and glaciers, hunted animals that are now extinct, and saw vast fields of wildflowers bloom."

Hope listened without moving, enthralled by the words and the man who spoke them. While Rio talked she saw her land change before her eyes—and she saw him change, too. His country drawl was overlaid with words and phrases and concepts that should have been utterly alien to a drifting cowhand.

"But the last ice age ended, the weather warmed, and rivers stopped running year-round," he said. "Less moisture to evaporate. Less moisture to gentle the climate. More evaporation and then more, until the rains couldn't keep up." His voice was low, intense, seeing today's drought foreshadowed in the climatic shifts of fifteen thousand years ago. "The vast lakes began to evaporate. They shrank and shrank and shrank until nothing is left today but what we call Great Salt Lake and Pyramid Lake on the California-Nevada border."

He closed his eyes for a moment, seeing it happen, vast lakes becoming a desert. "All that immensity of water. Gone."

Hope saw, too, and mourned.

When Rio's eyes opened, he looked out on today's land, a dry land layered with fossil life forms from long-dead lakes.

"Today almost no water flows out of the Basin and Range country to any sea," he said simply. "Think of

it, Hope. Thousands upon thousands of square miles of land drained by rivers that run into the desert and vanish. Mountain runoff goes down to the playas, the sinks, the basins between the ranges. And there the water stays. There are no networks of ponds and lakes, no rills and creeks and rivers running down to a waiting sea. There is only a blazing sun and an empty sky. And the wind, always the wind, blowing over the changing face of the land, touching all of its secrets.”

Hope heard both Rio’s words and the hissing whisper of a dry wind blowing over the Valley of the Sun. She had a thousand questions to ask him, a lifetime of questions aching for answers. Yet she didn’t speak because she wanted him to keep talking, wanted to see the world as he saw it, an endless process of change and renewal, seas and mountains rising and falling, continents shifting.

And through it all there were rivers and clouds pregnant with rain, the recurring miracle of water.

As though Rio sensed her silent plea, he began talking again. “In the rare cases where there’s still enough runoff to keep a low spot covered with water year-round, the lakes evaporate at a fantastic rate, up to one hundred fifty inches a year.”

Hope winced. “God. It barely rains a tenth of that most years.”

“That’s how fresh becomes salt, over time. All water, even so-called fresh water, contains tiny amounts of dissolved salts. When the water evaporates, what goes into the air is truly fresh, no salts allowed.

The salts stay behind. Each year the fresh water goes and the salts remain."

Her saddle creaked as she moved slightly, as though she would hold back the flight of water from the dry land.

"Without enough new, fresh water, evaporation slowly turns a freshwater lake into a saltwater lake, useless to animals or plants," Rio said simply. "The Great Salt Lake is what's left of one of the huge Pleistocene lakes. Mono Lake is the remainder of another. Salt and little water." He shrugged. "That's how it went from the Sierra Nevada to western Utah and even beyond. All that land. All that water stolen by the sun and the thirsty sky."

Hope waited, watching him with an intensity that made her eyes almost dark. "Then the hydrologist was right? There's no hope for my ranch?"

Rio shifted in the saddle, wanting to promise and knowing he couldn't. All he could do was offer a fighting chance.

And that was all she had asked for. A fighting chance.

"Not all of the water evaporates," he said. "Some of it slides down into the land itself. It gathers between fist-sized rocks and pebbles no bigger than my thumb. It hides between grains of sand and oozes between particles of silt so fine you have to use a microscope to see them. It sinks down into some of the rock layers of the mountains themselves, limestone and sandstone and shale."

Suddenly Rio turned and pinned Hope with a vivid,

midnight-blue glance. "And the water stays there. There's water all through this country. Some of it is old water, fossil water, rains that fell when men hunted mammoths by the shores of ancient lakes."

Wind like a long exhalation from the past moved over Hope's skin, stirring her in a primal response. She looked at her ranch with new eyes, seeing beyond the drought of today to the water of a million yesterdays. When she turned back to Rio, her eyes were radiant with the vision he had shared.

He saw the beauty of her eyes, green and gold and brown, a mixture of colors that changed with each shift of light. He saw his own vision of time and the country reflected in her eyes and in the primal shiver of awareness that rippled through her.

And then he knew that she had understood his words as few people would have, or could. She had *listened* with her soul as well as her mind. She had seen time and the great land as he saw them, sharing his vision in an intimacy that he had never known with anyone.

At that moment he wanted nothing more than to lift Hope from the saddle and let her flow over his skin and he over hers like a rain-sweetened wind, touching all the secret places, bringing a passionate storm, sharing his flesh with her as deeply as he had shared his mind.

Silently cursing his unruly body, Rio reined Storm Walker around the landslide. After a moment he heard the long-legged gray mare follow. A shod hoof made a distinctive sound as steel rang on a stone buried just beneath the surface of the landslide.

When Aces moved alongside the stallion, Rio didn't

look at Hope. He couldn't. He was afraid that she would read the hunger in his eyes, afraid that her eyes would be hungry, too. Then he would reach for her, lift her into his arms, know her as deeply as he knew the land.

And in time the wind would blow and he would leave her as surely as water had left the land.

Rio rode on, wondering if the Great Basin's long-vanished rains hated themselves for leaving a hungry, hurting land behind.

Thirteen



HOPE AND RIO rode in silence until he could look at the bleak mountains without seeing a far more gentle flesh, could focus his thoughts on the slabs of differing rock strata broken and canted up to the sky instead of on the hunger that clawed through both his body and his mind.

He could deal with the passionate needs of his body. But the passionate hunger of his mind for Hope was new to him, as deeply disturbing to him as the upwelling of molten basalt was to the thick crust of the earth. He knew that their shared silence, like the shared vision before it, held an intimacy that he could neither describe nor deny.

Rio didn't speak until he was in control of himself again. It took a long time. Much too long.

"Most of the boundaries marked on my map of the ranch go something like 'one hundred and twenty paces on a Montana horse' or 'twelve degrees north-

west of Black Rock Wash,' " Rio said. His voice was practical, empty of visions, offering no more than the dictionary meaning of his words.

"Homesteaders' measurements," Hope said. "Dad called them horseback estimates."

"They're not a hell of a lot of use when you're trying to figure out how to avoid drilling a well on someone else's land. When was the most recent survey of your ranch done?"

"Oh, about 1865, shortly after Nevada became a state. That was when one of Mom's great-greats decided to file on land that we'd been squatting on for twenty years," Hope added with a small curve of a smile.

Rio sighed and tugged his hat into place. "That explains it," he drawled. "Some rawhide ancestor of yours took a notion and filed on about thirty square miles of sagebrush and foothills. Damn shame he didn't take a cut of the high-country watershed while he was at it."

"Oh, he tried, but we could only show improvements in the foothills—spreader dams we'd built to slow the flow of the runoff streams, water holes deepened and cleaned out, wells dug, that sort of thing. Because we didn't need anything like that for stock in the high country, where there is water year-round, we didn't make any improvements."

"So the government kept the high country and you kept as much of the foothills as you could," Rio summarized. It was an old, familiar story around the Basin and Range.

"Plus all the government land we could sneak cows

onto," she added wryly. "We've never been real big on fences here in Nevada."

He smiled. That, too, was an old, familiar story. "How deep were the wells in those days?"

"It's hard to say. You know how it is. The 'good old days' were always better. The truth is they had droughts then, too." She hesitated, fighting to keep her voice neutral. "It's also true that the water table is dropping gradually, and has been for years. Some of the drop comes from too much pumping for local irrigation. Some of it comes from pumping water out and selling it to cities like Las Vegas. And some of it," she said bleakly, "comes from the simple fact that less rain is falling. This is a dry land and it seems to be getting drier every year."

Rio heard the hollowness in Hope's voice that she couldn't hide. He didn't ask any more questions.

Side by side they rode in silence until the dirt track dwindled to a trail winding up toward a ridgeline covered with piñon and juniper. Higher up, far beyond the point where foothills blended into the mountains themselves, stands of aspens touched by frost blazed like golden embers burning against a green and gray backdrop of pine and sage.

Saddles creaked and the horses began to breathe deeply as they leaned into the steep climb that led to Piñon Camp. Finally the trail took them to a gently sloping piece of land where piñon and pine grew thickly. A sun-cured meadow made a tawny contrast with the black rocks of the mountainside and the dense green of the piñon.

To one side of the trail there was a fire-blackened ring of stones, a rack for hanging game, and faint old footpaths leading from the camp to the meadow. Overhead a hawk soared in transparent circles, watching for movement below. Ravens and scrub jays called from nearby perches, warning other animals of the intruders that had appeared from the dry lands below.

Rio took in everything with the quick, comprehensive glance of a man who has spent most of his life in wild country. Then he looked again, seeing beyond the superficial clothing of plants and animals to the geological history beneath.

The meadow and the camp were part of a bench, a small block of land that a minor fault zone had caused to break away from the larger mountain block. The mountain had continued to rise on the far side of the local fault, while on this side the bench had continued to rise, too, but more slowly. The result was a sloping land surface that was higher than the surrounding foothills but lower than the mountain it had sheared away from.

Rio reined Storm Walker across the open land. Ahead of him the mountain rose suddenly, its side bare of all but the most determined sagebrush. The various steeply tilted layers of rock that made up part of the mountain showed in the changing colors and textures of the cliff, looking like thick stone ribbons that had been pushed and pulled by unimaginable forces.

Though worn by time and weather, twisted and broken by the movements of the earth, the stone layers had a story to tell to anyone who could read them.

Some ribbons of stone were relatively young sedimentary rocks. But the majority of the stone layers were old, dense, so darkened and changed by time and the movements of the earth that they were all but impervious to the elements now. Storm, wind, water, sun, nothing changed them. They were the spent, blackened bones of a younger time, a different world.

Somewhere, tilted at a steep angle and buried from sight, Rio believed there would be at least one thick layer of limestone, legacy of the great sea that had covered the land long, long before man arrived forty million years ago, when the Basin and Range country lay beneath a wealth of water that could hardly be imagined now. Since then, continental plates had oozed over the earth's surface, their passage lubricated by molten rock. The movement of the plates changed everything, making mountains rise and dragging other lands down beneath the surface of the earth until it became so hot that rock melted and ran like water.

"What are you looking for?" Hope asked.

"Potential aquifers." Rio's eyes were intent on the mountainside as he visually traced various twists and turns of stone. "An aquifer is a layer of rock that can absorb water."

She looked at the mountainside and then at him, then back at the flint-dry slope. Though she said nothing, it wasn't hard to read doubt in her silence.

"I know it's hard to believe," he said, reaching back into his saddlebag without taking his eyes off the mountain, "but some kinds of rock layers are nothing but big stone sponges. Given time and the right condi-

tions, those strata will soak up incredible amounts of water.”

“If you say so,” she muttered. Her tone was as full of doubt as her expression.

By touch alone, he pulled a worn map and a pencil out of his saddlebag. “Sandstone is an aquifer, a stone sponge. So is limestone. Buried alluvial fans make great sponges. Most of your wells are drawing on buried beds of sand and gravel washed down from the mountains millions of years ago.”

She looked at his hands. He was sketching as he talked.

“The water your wells brought up came from recent rains,” he continued, “this year’s water and the last, water soaking down into the land and renewing the wells with every rainy season.”

He tipped his hat back on his head and studied the map. A lock of hair, straight and black as night, fell over his forehead. He didn’t notice. His attention was on the tiny symbols he was adding to the worn map.

Hope ached to push the lock of hair back into place, to feel its texture and the heat of the man who wasn’t even looking at her.

“In most places on earth,” he said, squinting up at the mountain, “the groundwater would just ooze slowly downhill until it reached a river or a lake or the sea itself. But this isn’t most places. Here the water just sinks down and down until it reaches a layer of rock it can’t penetrate or until the heat of the basalt welling up from the mantle turns water into steam and sends it pushing back to the surface as hot springs and geysers.”

She remembered, and in remembering, wanted to weep. Turner's land had such hot springs today. The Valley of the Sun had once had them, but they had dried up in her childhood, leaving behind a crust of colorful minerals and the memory of unearthly turquoise water that had pulsed with the earth's own heartbeat.

"Most people think of this land as desolate, sterile, and uninteresting," Rio said, his voice vibrant with his pleasure in the wild landscape. "It isn't. In many ways it's the richest, most exciting, and rarest of all the lands on earth."

Hope heard the emotion in his voice and felt even more drawn to him. She, too, loved this lean and difficult land. She, too, had learned the subtle, sweet, extraordinary rewards that the land gave to those who understood it. Her mother had never found those rewards.

Her father had, and had given up his wife and family rather than leave the land.

A quick movement of Rio's head caught Hope's attention, but it was the mountain he looked toward, not her. She remembered his words, watched his confidence as he reduced his observations to mysterious symbols.

And she wondered who Rio really was, and how someone of his obvious education had become a man who drifted through the country like the wind, leaving little to mark his passage but enigmatic symbols made upon the softer surfaces of the land.

What set him to living with the wind? What would it take to hold him in one place?

Hope heard her silent questions and smiled a bitter-sweet smile. Nothing held the wind. Nothing.

Certainly not a woman's dreams.

"What are you looking for?" she asked.

If he heard the sadness in her voice, he didn't show it. He wedged the notebook under his thigh and reached back into the saddlebag again.

"I'm looking for a layer of sandstone or limestone that's sandwiched between strata of rock that won't let water leak away. Sort of like a solid river flowing between waterproof banks."

It wasn't the answer Hope had asked for, but she knew it was the only one she would get. She shook off the sadness that clung to her like dust to the dry land. Her ranch needed water. Rio was a man who could find water. That was all that mattered.

It had to be.

"How does water get into the limestone if it's sandwiched between waterproof layers of rock?" she asked after a moment.

Rio glanced aside and couldn't help smiling with approval. She not only listened, she thought about what she heard. Other people he had helped had listened to him without understanding. They had been focused on only one thing. Water.

He knew that Hope needed water as much as the others had. Yet she was able to see the land as something more than a way to make a living. She sensed that in some indescribable way the land was alive, growing and changing with its own rhythms, its own inevitable movements, its own awesome beauty.

Hope saw that you could share the land's life if you had enough room in your soul for the sound of coyotes

calling to a moon they had always known and would never understand, and for the sheen of a rainbow stretching between drought and water, and for the tiny, fleeting perfection of a medicine flower blooming against rocks a billion years old.

With a feeling of inevitability as deep as time, Rio understood that Hope had room in her soul for all that and more, much more, things he had always hungered for and never touched.

Does she know my hunger as deeply as I know her beauty?

With an odd feeling of sadness he turned his mind to Hope's question rather than his own. Her question was the only one that he would allow himself to answer.

"If the sandwich is lying flat," he said, demonstrating with one palm on top of the other, "the rain will just roll off the top piece of bread, the waterproof layer. But if you break the sandwich in several places and tilt the pieces up toward the sky, the aquifer—that's the softer center of the sandwich—will be open to the rain."

"So the center, the sponge, just soaks up everything?" she asked.

"I wish," he said wryly. "It would make my job a lot easier. Most of what falls still vanishes as runoff in mountain streams. But not all of it. Some of that water sinks into the aquifer itself. Pulled by gravity and pushed by the weight of new rain sinking in, the water seeps down through the aquifer."

Rio dismounted, rummaged in his saddlebags, and pulled out a hinged black box no bigger than a pack of

cigarettes. He handled it with the same ease that he handled reins or boots, silently telling Hope that the box was very familiar to him. When he opened it, she caught a glimpse of a mirror on one side and what appeared to be a complex compass on the other.

She watched with growing curiosity as he held the box up, tilted it until it roughly matched the line of the rock layer that interested him, fiddled with a small lever on the back of the box, and then wrote something on the map. He repeated the process several times, using different strata of rock.

"Is that a compass?" she asked.

"A special kind, yes. It's called a Brunton compass." He showed it to her. "The built-in clinometer measures the dip of a rock stratum. Of course, you're supposed to lay it right on the stratum you're working with." He glanced toward the huge, nearly vertical chunk of land in front of him. "Since I left my mountain goat at the ranch, I'm doing it the easy way. For now, a guesstimate is good enough."

"What did you learn from the compass?"

"That the dip of the rock layer is steep, but not steep enough to put an aquifer totally out of reach if you drilled down on the flats. That's assuming there's an aquifer in that broken mess," he added, studying the rugged mountains. "And also assuming the aquifer runs beneath the mountain all the way down to your ranch without being interrupted by fault zones. Big assumptions."

"What happens if it's faulted?"

Rio mounted Storm Walker in an easy motion and

settled into the saddle. "Sometimes the water leaks away at the fault zones. Sometimes the aquifer is offset so much by faults that you can't find it again. Sometimes it just slips down so far that you can't get to it."

Hope gestured toward the steep mountain slope he had been measuring. "Is there an aquifer?"

"No. The sandstone is dry, or there would be a seep right here, maybe even a spring."

It was absurd to feel disappointed, but she felt it just the same. "Oh."

He replaced the Brunton compass in his saddlebag. "Don't worry. This is just one small piece of the mountain. Not even a representative part. It's a transition between Turner land and your own."

"What do you mean? We're both bounded by the Perdidas on one side."

"The mountains near his place are almost entirely made of Precambrian rock a billion and a half years old, stone so hard it makes a steel hammer ring. There's no way for water to sink into that kind of dense rock. Everything runs off in streams or gathers on the surface in lakes. Even where little pieces of the mountain have washed down to the plains and built up rough soil, the groundwater stays close to the surface because of the impermeable roots of the mountain beneath."

She squinted, imagining a relatively thin layer of sand and gravel covering the much more solid rock layer beneath. "That's why Turner has so much water, isn't it? The water can't sink down and get away from his wells. It's all there, waiting to be tapped."

“For a while, yes. If he doubles his cropland as he talks about doing, he’ll be living off the future. Sooner or later he’ll suck it all dry.”

At least he has a future.

Though Hope didn’t say it aloud, she might as well have. Rio knew how desperate the Valley of the Sun was for water. It was there in the empty sky, in the dry land, and in Hope watching him, eyes filled with fears and dreams.

Fourteen



WHEN HOPE COULDN'T bear the silence any longer, she looked away from the land's innocent betrayal and asked Rio, "What's different about my mountains?"

"The rocks are much younger, more porous. They erode much more quickly. That's why your mountains are lower than Turner's, even though they're part of the same block fault. Your outwash plains are thick, deep. Water soaks down into them almost as soon as it falls."

"Then the land should hold more water, not less."

"But it's out of reach," he said simply. "There are many places on your ranch where you could go down a thousand feet and then keep on going for thousands more and get nothing for your time and money but dry gravel."

Hope took a ragged breath at the thought of drilling that far down and finding no water, a dry hole draining away her slender reserves of money, turning her dreams to dust.

When Rio saw the fear darkening her eyes, he cursed his thoughtless words. With gentle, relentless fingertips he turned her face toward his. For the first time since he had seen his visions reflected in her eyes, he allowed emotion back into his voice, the deep certainty that came from a knowledge that had nothing to do with diplomas and schools.

"That's why you hired me," he said simply. "I won't waste your money drilling where there isn't any chance of water. Do you believe me?"

His words and his touch took away the fear that had chilled Hope. She put her hand over his fingers and pressed, not speaking for fear that her voice would break.

Her eyes spoke for her. They said that she trusted him with her dreams, and that she was quickly, inevitably, coming to the point where she would trust him with herself. That was something she had never done with any man. She had held herself aloof, knowing from the example of her parents' lives and her sister's life that loving someone wasn't enough to ensure peace, much less a dream of love returned.

So Hope had loved only the land.

Now Rio was sliding through the hard layers that had protected the life-giving core of her. Each day with him, each conversation, each touch, he sank more deeply into her, coming closer to the instant when he would break through the last layer of her reserve and touch the flowing wealth of love concealed deeply inside her.

The thought terrified her.

And the thought that he might not break through,

might not touch her, might not release her love, also terrified her.

"Hope?"

"Yes," she said in a husky voice, "I believe you."

With an effort of will, Rio forced himself to release the silky warmth of her. Even after he removed his hand, his fingertips tingled with shared warmth, the energy of two lives touching.

Without a word he turned Storm Walker toward the edge of Piñon Camp and forced himself to think only of finding water in a dry land.

"Are there other benches like this farther south toward the ranch house?" he asked.

Caught in her own thoughts, she didn't answer. *His fingers no longer touched her skin.*

She was shocked by the loss she felt at such a simple thing as the absence of his touch. Shaken, she reined Aces to follow the stallion.

"Piñon Camp," she said finally. "It's a landmark around here simply because it's different."

"How about cliffs? Old mining or timber roads? Deep canyons or ravines? I'm looking for places where I can see layers of rock that are buried out of sight in other areas."

Frowning, Hope recalled details of the land she had ridden over since she was old enough to sit upright in a saddle. "Just on the ranchland, or on the lease lands, too?"

"If the lease is above your watershed, I'll be glad to look at it, although I've already seen most of the government land. Whatever you have on your own property should come first."

She urged Aces to the edge of the bench until she could see the country falling steeply away below. Storm Walker came up alongside the mare, standing so close that Hope's stirrup rubbed against Rio's.

"Over there," she said. Pointing, she touched his sleeve. Even that light brush of her fingertips against cloth reminded her of his vitality. The heat of him demanded a deeper touch, a longer sharing. "See that bald spot just beyond the ranch house?"

"Yes."

"Straight up from there, hidden behind the shoulder of the mountain, there's an old road. A hundred years ago there was some kind of mining operation up there. Silver or gold, I forget which. It didn't amount to a hill of beans, but they cut a wagon road up above Wind Canyon, into the high country where there was another mine."

"Any luck?"

"Just the bad kind. The mine caved in long ago, but some of the road is still there. It's a scary piece of real estate. It hangs by its toenails to the edge of Wind Canyon. The canyon itself is thousands of feet deep. The land is different there. Crumbly rather than solid. Even sagebrush has a hard time clinging to the mountainside."

"Perfect," Rio said, satisfaction obvious in his tone.

"If you say so," she muttered. "I remember that road scaring the hell out of me."

"You don't have to go."

She gave him a level look.

He knew she wouldn't be staying behind.

"There are a few other places between here and there that have bare rock," she said.

"We'll see them on the way."

She shook her head. "Not unless we plan to be gone for a few days. Each one of the sites is up a long, blind canyon."

His eyes narrowed as he considered the possibilities. "Any signs of water?"

"Do you mean springs?" she asked in disbelief. "If there were springs, I'd be laying pipe instead of hauling water by truck."

"Nothing as obvious as a spring. I'm looking for unusually big brush, grass that stays greener longer than in other places at the same elevation and exposure, that sort of thing."

"Oh. Well, maybe in Stirrup Canyon. Dead Man's Boot might be a possibility. Then there's always Silver Rock Basin," she added, gesturing toward the lower part of the ranch. "Jackass Leap, too. That's up above the head of Wind Canyon."

"Hold it." Rio began unfolding more of his map.

The basic map was the result of a USGS survey. It showed each contour of the thirty sections of land that made up the Valley of the Sun. The paper was nearly four feet by four feet, more suited to a kitchen table than to a saddle. The map showed deep creases and frayed edges from being handled a lot.

Hope wondered how many times Rio had studied the map. And why. Surely the time since she had hired him hadn't been enough to make that much wear on a

map. Yet what she could see of the map covered her ranch and little else.

"Silver Rock Basin is no problem," Rio said, "but where is Dead Man's Boot?"

She laughed. "That's a family name, not an official one. So are the other ones."

Smiling, he refolded the map. "Where do you think most of the names on maps came from? Place names are one of the richest oral traditions in the West." He handed her the pencil and the map. "Mark them in."

She took the pencil, unfolded a panel of the awkward map, and was promptly lost.

The amount of detail already on the paper was both staggering and absolutely unlike any map she had ever used. In addition to contour lines showing the changing elevations of the land, there were many other lines whose purpose was a mystery to her. Most of those lines had been drawn in after the fact. Indecipherable symbols—both printed and handwritten—appeared in odd places on the map. Even more enigmatic notes appeared in the margin. Formulas, Greek letters, cryptic comments; all had been added by hand.

Hope had only to glance at the map to know that Rio already had put in a lot of time studying her land, much more than he could have in the less than two weeks since she had hired him. She looked up, puzzled.

"Lost?" he asked, expecting it.

"Yes, but it's not just the map."

"What else, then?"

"You," she said quietly.

He stared at her.

"Nothing adds up," she said. "You're a drifting horsebreaker who knows more about this land than the highly educated, highly recommended hydrologist who was out here six weeks ago. You've worked for me for less than two weeks, but this map is worn thin in the creases and has enough notes on it for some kind of textbook."

She wanted to go on, to say, You have only one name, and it's neither Scandinavian nor Zuni nor Scots. Nobody knows where you came from or where you're going, but Mason trusts you more than he trusts anybody except me. You have a reputation as a bad man to cross, but you've been so gentle with me that it's all I can do not to crawl into your arms and never let go.

She wanted to say those things, but she didn't, for Rio was already talking, answering the questions she had asked and a few more that she hadn't.

"I heard about you all over the West," he said simply. "A drifter in Idaho told me there was a woman who needed help in a place called Valley of the Sun, Nevada. In Utah a farmer I helped said his wife's sister had heard from her brother in Nevada that a woman called Hope needed a well and nobody would dig it for her. A cattle breeder I once found water for said he'd sold one of his best Angus to a woman with beautiful eyes and a mind like a steel trap, and that she was going to lose her ranch unless the rains came or she found water."

Hope's throat closed with tears she fought not to shed. But the thought of strangers knowing her need, and caring enough to help in the only way they could,

made it very hard for her to hold back. She wanted to tell Rio to stop talking, that he would make her cry and she didn't want to, but she couldn't get any words past the emotion filling her throat.

"So I drifted south," Rio said quietly, watching Hope with eyes that saw everything, the vulnerability and the tears, the determination and the strength. "And I listened. Every time the wind blew, it whispered your name and your need and your dreams."

Silent tears slid past her dark lashes to leave shining trails on her cheeks.

"The closer I came to the Valley of the Sun," he said, "the more people talked about you. People I had helped in the past left messages for me in every country store and café in the West. The messages all said the same thing: *This is a good woman, Rio. Can you help her the way you helped us?*"

The midnight blue of Rio's eyes was so intense that it was like crystal burning in the sun. She watched him with equal intensity, feeling his words sinking into her, sliding through the protective layers she had built up to guard the vulnerable woman beneath.

"I didn't know if I could help you, and I wasn't going to come to you until I did know," he said.

Then he looked out over the land again, freeing her from the blue blaze of his eyes.

"This country isn't a stranger to me," he said quietly. "I've found water in some damned unlikely places. And I've seen a few places where there isn't any water to be found anywhere by anyone. I didn't know if the Valley of the Sun was one of those places."

She held her breathing, waiting, hoping not to hear the end of her dream.

I've seen a few places where there isn't any water to be found anywhere by anyone.

"I went over all the USGS maps, got the latest satellite photos, talked to university experts and to Indians whose ancestors had hunted along the shores of long-ago lakes. I flew over the steep parts of your ranch with a photo recon camera and a pilot who wasn't afraid of God, the devil, or gravity." Rio's mouth turned up wryly. "Hell of a flyer, though. He saved me weeks of rough-country riding and hiking."

Hope looked at Rio, but tears prevented her from seeing more than the powerful outline of his body against the sky. "Why?" she asked huskily. "Why did you go to all that trouble for someone you didn't even know?"

It was a question that no one had ever asked him. In the past, people had been more than happy to take what he offered. They had never stopped to wonder why he wanted to help.

But Rio had asked himself that question for as many years as he had drifted through people's lives and through the bright, colorful shadows cast by their dreams.

He didn't have an answer.

He had helped many people, touched the luminous edges of their dreams, and moved on. Those people remembered him with gratitude and sometimes even affection. They always had a meal and a bed and a handshake for him whenever he went back.

But they didn't know him. He was as much a mys-

tery to them as their ability to dream in the face of brutal odds was a mystery to him.

He found water for those special dreamers. And each time, each place, each well, he wondered if he would also find the ability to put down roots and dream for himself.

He hadn't found any dream to equal the whispering seduction of the wind moving over the face of the land. He no longer believed that such a dream existed.

"I admire people who are strong enough to dream," Rio said finally. His long fingers caressed Hope's face, feeling the warmth of her tears sliding beneath his fingertips. "Like you."

"You're strong," she whispered. Then, even more softly, she asked, "What are your dreams?"

"I don't have any. I stopped dreaming the day I really understood what half-breed meant."

Her eyes darkened. Slowly she shook her head, denying both the pain of Rio's long-ago discovery and the ache of her own realization that she was falling in love with a man who had no dreams.

She closed her eyes and tried not to cry anymore. Tears kept falling in spite of it.

He bent slowly toward her, brushed his lips over her eyelashes, tasted the warmth and salt of her tears. He wanted to do more, much more. She called to his senses and his soul in a way that nothing ever had, even the wind.

"It's all right," he murmured.

He kissed her softly, aching to turn the world inside out and make everything right for her, the past and the

present and the future rich with water and dreams. But he couldn't do that, and unless he stopped touching her, he wouldn't be able to remember why he shouldn't touch her at all.

He was the wrong man for her.

It was that simple and that final.

Slowly, feeling like he was pulling off his own skin, he straightened in the saddle again until he no longer touched Hope.

"I'll help you find your well, your dream," he said quietly.

It was the only promise he could give to her. The only promise he could keep.

She opened her eyes. Her tears were shining on Rio's lips. The sight pierced her, coming so close to her core that she almost cried out in fear and hope.

"But what about you?" she asked.

"I'll share your dream for a time. Then the wind will call my name and I'll go."

Hope looked away from him. She bit her lip, trying not to rage against the truth of his words, wanting to deny the pain stabbing through her as his need reached down past her barriers to the reservoir of love that she had protected so long and so well. She blinked slowly, releasing tears from beneath her burning eyelids.

It was Rio she cried for, not herself. It was too late to protect herself. He had touched her too deeply. Whether or not he found water on the Valley of the Sun, she would love the man who had no dreams.

"I'll dream for you, Rio," she promised in a soft,

husky voice. "I'll dream for you until you can dream for yourself."

Hope brushed her arm over her eyes, clearing them of tears. Then she calmly began to puzzle out the mysteries of the map that he had given her, matching place names with contour lines until she could orient herself. With increasing confidence, she began to fill in the old family names that Rio had asked for.

Motionless but for the occasional small stirrings of his horse, Rio watched her work over the map. He would have leaned closer, pointing out contour lines and explaining symbols to her, but he didn't trust his hand not to tremble with the aftershocks of the emotion that had gone through him when he had heard her husky voice promising to dream for him.

In the past women had sometimes cried over him, when the wind blew and they knew he would be going soon. But that wasn't why Hope cried. She was the first woman to look deeply inside him and cry when she saw the void where his dreams had been. She had wept, knowing his emptiness and pain. She had wept for him rather than for herself.

And she would dream for him.

"I'll put in the rest of the names tonight," she said, refolding the map along its telltale creases. "Dead Man's Boot is closest to us. It has a clump of big sage that has to be seen to be believed. Nothing else like it on the ranch."

Hope didn't look at Rio when she spoke. She didn't trust herself to. If she saw again the soul-deep hunger in his eyes when he talked of dreams, she wouldn't be able to control her tears or her need to hold him.

With a touch of the reins she sent Aces over the lip of the bench and onto the steep trail.

Holding Storm Walker in check, Rio watched until Hope disappeared into a steep fold in the mountain-side. He had never felt so alone as he did at that instant, with her words still echoing through him.

*I'll dream for you until you can dream for yourself.
I'll dream for you. I'll dream. For you.*

The echoes were like the wind blowing through emptiness, defining it.

"Don't do it, Hope," he said softly, aching, her husky words echoing through him, defining him. "You'll waste your dreams until the mountains are nothing but sand at the bottom of a nameless sea. I've forgotten how to dream. Don't dream for me."

Yet Hope's promise kept echoing in his mind, sending fine tremors of emotion through him. He couldn't have been more shocked if she had said she loved him.

And then he realized that she had said just that.

He bowed his head, staring sightlessly at his fingers wrapped around the reins. Storm Walker tugged at the bit, wanting to follow the other horse. His rider didn't notice.

Finally Rio yielded his iron grip on the reins, allowing the stallion to plunge over the edge onto the narrow trail. The shrill cry of a hawk followed him, carried by the wind.

The hawk's cry became a word repeated endlessly, falling from the empty sky.

Hope.

Fifteen



"NOW, ARE YOU SURE, HONEY?" Mason asked. His faded yet still clear eyes measured the lines of worry on Hope's face. "I ain't all in a lather to drive to Salt Lake just to eat turkey and trimmings. We got real fine turkey right here in Nevada." Then he remembered. "Hell, tonight's your birthday. I can't go."

"Of course you can," she said. "I won't be alone here, and even if I was, it wouldn't be any big deal. I've had birthdays before."

"But—"

"No buts," she cut in firmly. "You're barely going to make Thanksgiving with your sister-in-law as it is. Get going."

"I don't like it. Rio's out poking around most of the time, looking for a place to drill. You'll be lonely."

The wind gusted suddenly, stirring up dust. The sky was blue and cold, devoid of clouds.

"Mason, if you don't go to Utah, I swear I'll saddle

Aces and ride to Piñon Camp and not come back until December first. You haven't had a vacation for years. You deserve a few weeks with your nieces and nephews."

He watched her with anxious eyes. "You sure?"

"You can set your watch by it," she said firmly, using a favorite phrase of his.

Mason sighed, shifted his battered suitcase to his other hand, and followed her out to the tan pickup. "I don't feel right taking the truck."

"Rio said I could use his truck if I needed to go to town," she said patiently, ready to go over every argument one more time. "In fact, he insisted."

Mason hesitated before he opened the truck door and tossed in his suitcase. "All right, no need to put your hand on my back and shove. I know when I ain't wanted."

"Mason!" she said, shocked. Then she saw the mischief in his eyes. "That's right," she said quickly, putting her hand on his back and shoving gently, "you're not wanted. Go away."

Then she spoiled it by throwing her arms around him and hugging him from behind. He turned around and hugged her for a long moment, savoring the love she gave so freely to an old man whose only relationship to her was bittersweet, overlapping memories of her parents.

The wind flexed again, pushing against Mason as though hurrying him on his way. Hope's hair flew up, tickling his nose. He smoothed her hair with a gnarled hand, holding the soft strands away from the wind.

"I'll be home by the end of the month," he said, resting his gray-stubbled chin on her dark hair. "Sooner if Rio finds a place to start drilling. Keep that rifle handy. The bit of rain we been getting the last week or two ain't put all the snakes down."

She nodded her head, agreeing without arguing. She didn't want to open the subject of John Turner. Other than a few calls at odd times of the night, Turner hadn't bothered her. Maybe he had thought over the scene at his well and decided that she wasn't just being coy. Maybe he had finally gotten the point: she wasn't interested in him sexually.

The truck door slammed, the engine revved, and Mason let out the clutch.

"Take care," she said.

"You, too, honey. Don't be lonely, now."

"How could I be?" She smiled. "I've got the whole Valley of the Sun for company."

He winked, rolled up the window, and headed out of the ranch yard.

Hope's smile held a melancholy that she wasn't aware of. Even with Rio around, she was lonely. That was new.

She was still trying to get used to it.

Before Rio came she had been alone but not lonely. He had changed that. Despite her efforts to withdraw from any emotional connection with him, despite his own blunt withdrawal since their ride up to Piñon Camp, despite knowing she would be hurt more the closer she got, Hope longed to spend time with Rio, to talk with him. To touch him.

Yet she knew she couldn't. Not really. Not deeply.

He was like a rain-sweet wind blowing through her life, washing away the dust of years, revealing the living spirit beneath. She was the land, unmoving.

And the wind was always moving, always leaving the land behind. Leaving her.

In time, the wind would come again to the Valley of the Sun, bringing Rio once more, if only to claim the colts Storm Walker sired on his mares. Rio would return . . . and then he would leave again, called by the wind.

She wondered how many women around the West waited in an agony of hope for Rio's return, aching for him, holding their breath as they watched the road like ranchers scanning the desert sky for the first signs of life-giving rain. She didn't want to be one of those women.

Yet she was, and Rio hadn't even touched her.

Hope was both sad and grateful that he had left her alone since Piñon Camp. He talked with her on the water runs, but his talk dealt with weather and cattle, feed prices and the cost of fuel. Ranch talk. His voice was no longer rich with visions. His eyes were no longer dark with a hunger that went deeper than the night, as deep as his soul.

He hadn't touched her at all in the five days since Piñon Camp. Not even in the most casual way.

Not once.

Mason was right. Rio had too much respect for himself and for her to begin something that would end with his leaving and her crying.

It made Hope want to laugh bitterly, to lash out at the irony of life. As a child she had heard her parents argue about whether to live on the Valley of the Sun

with its endless, brutal demands, or to sell the ranch. Silently the child she had been assumed that if her parents just loved each other, everything would work out. Love was all that mattered.

And then the child had watched her mother and father tear each other apart in the name of love.

Hope had sworn then that she would never love a man. The cost was too high. The destruction too great. The grief too endless. It was all there in her parents' lives, in their arguments, in their letters, the words and phrases burned into Hope's mind, a warning of love's limitations that was branded on her soul:

I love you, Debbie. Come home to me. I need you. I need you with me at the end of the day when I'm so tired that nothing seems worth it.

And the reply, always the same.

Sell the ranch. I can't bear watching you kill yourself for that damned land. For nothing. I love you too much. Wayne, I love you!

In the end, the Valley of the Sun had killed Hope's father, just as her mother had predicted. It had killed Hope's mother, too. She had lived less than a year after burying the man she loved.

Yes, her parents had loved each other. Passionately, bitterly, hopelessly, helplessly.

It hadn't been enough.

Hope had learned the hard way that there were practical limitations on the thing called love. She had watched her mother, her father, and her poor broken sister try to make love carry more burden than it could.

Love didn't magically change people.

Hope had seen that simple fact demonstrated time and again. Her mother had loved her father with every bit of passion in her soul. It had been the same for him. But it hadn't changed them.

Her mother still couldn't live with the land.

Her father still couldn't live without it.

Love hadn't been able to bridge that fundamental difference between her parents.

Hope wasn't fool enough to forget love's limitations. She accepted the fact that she was falling in love with Rio. She also knew that it didn't make a damn bit of difference. It wouldn't change him. Or her. Rio was rootless, like the wind. And like the wind, he would leave her behind.

She had put down roots in the Valley of the Sun. Even if she could tear out those roots and survive, it wouldn't be enough.

Rio was what he was—a rain-sweet wind moving over the face of the land. Alone. As inevitably and as finally as the wild wind was alone. It was the life he had chosen. It was the life he had lived. It had made him what he was.

And she loved what he was, for better or for worse.

The knowledge expanded through Hope like the shock waves of an earthquake focused deep within her. She swayed, wrapping her arms around herself while old certainties shattered and fell away, leaving her vulnerable and raw and alone in a new world.

Is this how Mother felt when she realized that she had to leave the man she loved?

Is this how Father felt when he knew that the woman he loved would leave him?

Did they see the future coming down on them like a terrible desert storm, see it and know that there was nothing to do but to hang on and hope to survive until the storm passed?

They couldn't change each other.

They couldn't stop loving each other.

And they hadn't survived the storm.

"Hope? What's wrong? Is it Mason? Is he sick?"

It was Rio's voice, deep and worried, calling to her as though from a distance.

She opened her eyes and saw that he was close, close enough that she could see his concern in the intensity of his glance, the hard line of his mouth, his hands reaching for her in the instant before he controlled them.

At that moment she understood that he cared for her as much as he could, and he was protecting her in the only way he could. He was leaving her alone. He must have seen the clouds massing on their personal horizon. He was trying to protect her from that future storm, to keep her from being consumed. He was doing all that he could for her short of turning and walking away.

That he couldn't do, for it would have been even more cruel to her than staying. She had a ranch that was dying for lack of water, and he was a man who could find water in hell itself.

"Hope?" Rio's voice was soft yet harsh. "What is it? Is there anything I can do? How long have you been standing here?"

She answered the only question she could, for she

didn't know how long she had been standing in the yard. Long enough for her skin to feel dry and for a fine shimmer of dust to coat her arms. Long enough to learn more about love and herself and the future than she wanted to know.

"Mason's fine. He's on his way to Salt Lake," she said. She watched Rio with eyes that were dark, shadowed by understanding and regret. Her voice was soft, as shattered as her past certainty that she could never love a man the way she had come to love Rio.

Passionately. Helplessly. Hopelessly.

But not bitterly.

Not that. There was no room in Hope's soul for bitterness, because she had accepted what she was, and what he was, and that neither could change.

"How did it go today?" she asked. "Did you find a place to drill?"

"Tell me what's wrong."

"Nothing that can be changed," she said calmly.

She understood her own limitations and his. If she had been different, he wouldn't care about her. If he had been different, she wouldn't love him as she did.

"What do you mean?"

"There's nothing that I would change even if I could. I am who I am, and . . . *you're Rio*. I wouldn't change what you are even if it meant a river flowing forever through the Valley of the Sun."

Her sad, accepting smile made the small lines at either edge of Rio's mouth deepen into brackets of pain. He saw all that she hadn't said in the darkness of her beautiful eyes.

"I didn't want this!" His breath came in roughly and he said no more. His fingertips touched her cheek in the instant before he balled up his hand into a fist and stepped back. "I'm going into town. Some of my equipment just came in. Don't wait dinner for me. I'll get a room and stay over for a few days, until I get everything I need."

She didn't answer, didn't move, didn't react in any way.

"Hope, are you listening?"

She nodded. She was listening, hearing everything he didn't say, the pain and the anger and the frustration, as relentless as the wind. "Yes. I'm listening."

The wind swirled around her, blowing over the land with a long, low wail that was so familiar she didn't even hear it. The same wind curled around Rio, pressing his shirt against his chest, riffling through his hair like a lover's fingers.

Abruptly Hope turned away and went into the house.

Rio didn't follow.

As she closed the front door behind her, she knew it was good that he was leaving. She was too vulnerable to him right now, still caught in the aftershocks of her own realization. She didn't think she would be able to sit across from him in the intimacy of the kitchen and not tell him the simple truths that she had just discovered.

I love you.

I wish you loved me.

But it doesn't matter. Even if you loved me, you'd

still have to leave. I understand you, Rio. I know you'll hate yourself if you hurt me.

And I'm already hurting.

Hell of a mess, isn't it, love?

The wind paused long enough for her to hear Rio's pickup truck leave the ranch yard in a rush of gravel and grit. Then the wind swept on, blotting out every sound but its own endless sigh.

When she was certain that nothing remained of Rio, not even dust hanging in the air, she went out again, climbed into Behemoth, and began the chore of hauling water. The loaded rifle kept her company in its rack behind her head.

When she drove over the ridge and down to the emerald oasis of the well, there wasn't any other vehicle in sight. As far as she knew, Turner hadn't come here since the day he had made a grab and she had locked herself in the truck.

Yet each day, every day, she watched for him at the well.

Squinting against the strong wind, Hope jumped out of the cab and set up the water hose. The job wasn't as difficult as it had been before Rio replaced the worn coupling and Mason did something to the generator that made it start more easily. Also, she wasn't as tired as she had been before Rio came to the Valley of the Sun. He had quietly, systematically taken much of the hard physical work from her shoulders. If she objected, he simply ignored her.

In truth, she hadn't protested much. There was enough work for five more ranch hands.

Behemoth's tank filled with sweet water until it couldn't hold any more. Hope stowed the hose and drove back to her forlorn wells, where some of her cattle stood hunched against the brash, dry wind. They welcomed the truck with low bawls, as though asking what had taken so long.

Enough rain had fallen so that all of the range animals weren't completely dependent on the various wells. It was a good thing, because the wells weren't dependable. There hadn't been enough rain to bring up the water table or the natural feed. If real rain didn't come quickly, the minor seeps and holes would dry up again, forcing all the cattle back to the area around the wells.

Then Hope would have to start hauling food as well as water. Or she would have to sell more cattle.

When the truck was empty, she racked the hose again and headed back to the ranch. There was enough water that she didn't have to make a second run today. There was even water to spare for a bath if she was feeling a little reckless.

The thought tantalized her all the way back to the house. She argued with herself over using water that could go for cooking or drinking or watering cows. Then she decided that the bath was almost medicinal. She needed it to soak away the weariness that she had felt since she understood more than she wanted to about herself and Rio and love.

Besides, it was her birthday.

As a kind of penance for the water she was going to use, Hope forced herself to go through the ranch ac-

counts before she went upstairs. Feeling too tired for five o'clock in the afternoon, she sat in the straight-backed walnut chair that was paired with the old oak desk her father had used.

The first thing she saw was the note she had written to herself ten months ago and pinned to the cubbyhole: *Second mortgage due 1/15.*

Though it didn't really worry her, for a moment she stared at the note. Despite the many temptations, she hadn't touched the money she had set aside for the balloon payment. Selling half of her remaining range cattle had been an emotional wrench, but it had given her enough cash to keep the ranch going for a while longer without nibbling away at the money she had set aside for the mortgage and for drilling a well.

Sighing, she pulled out the ranch account books and began to catch up on the bills.

"An hour of this," she promised herself, "and then a lovely, long, hot bath. A happy birthday present to me."

She kept her promises, even to herself. Especially to herself.

After an hour at the books and an hour in a steaming bath, she felt less . . . brittle. With languid movements she towed her body dry, then her hair. Almost defiantly she smoothed a perfumed cream into her skin before she walked to her bedroom. The clean clothes she had set out on the way to her bath lay on the bed.

She looked at them and felt something close to rebellion. Abruptly she decided that she didn't want to put on jeans and a work shirt and boots again. She wanted to feel soft fabric caressing her, to look down

and see her long legs bare of everything but silky skin. She wanted to look like a woman, to feel like one.

"Why shouldn't I?" she asked the silence. "No one is in the house but me."

Mason wouldn't be here to smile at the first instant of seeing her, and then sigh sadly when he realized that there was so little opportunity for Hope to laugh and dance and flirt with admiring men.

Rio wouldn't be here to look at her and wonder if she was trying to seduce him with feminine clothes and a perfume that could be enjoyed only by a man who was close enough to brush against her skin.

Tonight she was a woman alone. She could dress to please her own needs.

With hands that had almost forgotten how, Hope put on delicate touches of makeup that brought out the beauty of her slightly tilted eyes and generous mouth. Then she went to her closet and pulled out a floor-length caftan cut from a French velvet so fine and soft that it was almost impossible to tell apart from brushed silk. The rich forest green of the cloth brought out the elusive green of her eyes.

After a moment of hesitation, she put her hair up in one of the sophisticated styles that had once been a daily part of her life. The golden nugget earrings she put on had belonged to her great-grandmother, a present from a man who had come home from the Klondike gold rush.

The slippers Hope chose were very high heeled mules, made to accent the long, elegantly curved legs that had been her fortune. The legs themselves were re-

vealed by a tantalizing slit that was just off-center of the deceptively casual lines of the caftan. It had been one of the most successful outfits she had ever worn in her modeling career.

Despite the caftan's impressive price tag, she had never regretted buying it. More than once the caressing velvet had picked up her sagging spirits. Like tonight.

When Hope looked in the mirror, she saw someone who had become a stranger to her. The reflection showed an elegant woman who would be at home anywhere in the world of glamour and cities, but had chosen to live in the Valley of the Sun and had never looked back.

Not even now, when she was alone on a dying ranch.

"I hope my birthday dinner appreciates me," she said, smiling with amusement at her image in the mirror. "Not every meal gets eaten by someone in pajamas as fancy as mine."

It was crazy even to think of fixing dinner in the elegant caftan, but Hope was feeling a little crazy at the moment. She had pushed herself too long, too hard, in too many ways. She needed a rest from the relentless pressures of her ranch and her foolish heart.

She went to the kitchen and opened the bottle of Chardonnay that she had put in the refrigerator for the day that Rio found a place to drill for water—a day that hadn't yet come.

A day that might never come.

That was something she wouldn't think about now. Worrying about what she couldn't change wouldn't do anything but wear her out.

She poured herself a glass of wine and inhaled the

heady scent of fine Chardonnay. She breathed in again, savoring the moment with the intensity that was as much a part of her as the love waiting deep within her for the exquisite instant of release. A release that might never come.

And she wouldn't think about that, either.

Beyond the house, the wind wailed as though unhappy at being shut out of the kitchen's warmth. Humming in quiet counterpoint to the long cry of the wind, Hope pulled a chicken out of the refrigerator. Using a knife that Rio had honed to a glittering edge, she cut away the breast and boned it with quick strokes.

The blade moved smoothly, slicing flesh as easily as butter. Even Mason had been impressed by the edge on the old knife. He had threatened to use it in place of his usual straight razor. Rio had offered to shave Mason with a butter knife instead. A very dull one.

Smiling, remembering, Hope set the knife aside, rinsed off her hands, and reached for the crystal wine-glass. The wind's cry climbed higher, then dropped into a temporary silence. As the wine touched her lips she heard the muffled sound of a vehicle pulling up outside.

Rio! He must have come back early.

The glass dipped alarmingly in her hand, almost spilling wine onto the velvet caftan. She heard a door slam, heard booted feet coming up the front steps, heard the front door opening. A wave of longing swept through her, shaking her.

And then John Turner walked into the kitchen as though he owned the house and everything in it.

Especially her.

Sixteen



HOPE'S FIRST REACTION on seeing Turner was anger and a disappointment so deep that it made her dizzy.

"Haven't you ever heard of knocking on doors?" she asked coldly.

The wind gusted back up to its full strength, making the house tremble with its endless power. Wind whispered grittily against windows and walls in a long exhalation that became a low wail masking all sound from outside the walls, increasing the isolation inside.

Turner smiled with a predatory anticipation he didn't bother to conceal. "Baby doll, I'm hurt. Is that any way to welcome your fiancé on your birthday, especially when he's got a present for you?"

Hope remembered the night eight years ago, when he had grabbed her and taught her just how careless a strong man could be.

Turner noticed the elegant green dress, the shad-

owed invitation of her long, long legs, the heightening of her eyes, the fullness of her mouth. She was a woman dressed for a lover.

And she hadn't known he was coming.

"Who are you all tarted up for?" he snarled.

"No one."

"Bullshit. No woman dresses up like that except for a man."

"I do."

She went to the refrigerator, pulled out a ham, and sliced off a chunk. Swiss cheese came next. Deliberately ignoring Turner, she cut the ham and cheese into neat strips.

Turner watched her every motion with brooding eyes. He hadn't dressed up for her. He was wearing the same spotless, ironed jeans, shiny boots, and crisp white shirt he wore every day on his ranch.

"It's Rio," Turner said. His voice was like his eyes—flat, ugly, threatening. "The bunkhouse gossips are right. That half-breed's fucking you."

Hope's fingers tightened around the knife handle. Her hands wanted to shake with anger and a wave of fear. Turner was a man who had never understood a woman's refusal. Never accepted it.

Never permitted it.

I should have known he would wait until I was truly alone. That's his style. No witnesses. No word but his against mine. And who would believe a dirt-poor ranch girl turned down the richest bachelor around?

No one believed me before. No one would now. What are a few bruises against a few million dollars?

Coolly Hope went through her options.

There weren't many. Assuming she could stay away from Turner long enough to get to a phone and call the sheriff—which she doubted—help was almost an hour away. There were two exits from the kitchen. Turner was standing in one and closer to the second than she was.

But somehow she had to get out of the kitchen. Given a chance, she was certain she could outrun him.

Ignoring him, she made small pockets in the chicken breast with the knife's gleaming tip. She tucked strips of ham and cheese into the pockets, along with a sprinkling of herbs.

There was no sound in the kitchen but the rough cry of the wind.

"You answer me when I talk to you," Turner said harshly.

"Nobody is my lover," she said, her voice as cool and precise as the blade Rio had sharpened. "Nobody is fucking me, either. Thank you for your neighborly concern, but you made a long drive for nothing."

Turner listened to her, measured the anger in the stiff line of her shoulders and acknowledged the only part of her words that he wanted to hear.

"I told you if you hired Rio, people would talk."

She shrugged with a casual ease she was far from feeling.

Mason was gone. Rio was gone. John Turner was here, standing between her and the nearest door.

"People talk all the time," she said calmly. "It's like the wind. Sound without meaning."

"Not when they're talking about my future wife."

The wind's keening rose until it was just short of a scream.

Hope wanted to scream with it, to curse Turner's thick indifference to anything but his own desires. Her sister Julie had been like that, totally self-absorbed. But Julie hadn't been consciously cruel.

Julie's selfishness had puzzled and saddened Hope. Turner's self-absorption frightened her.

She took a slow, inconspicuous breath. Defying him verbally was risky, but not nearly as risky as cowering. If she showed fear, Turner would be all over her in an instant, dragging her down to the hard floor, raping her no matter how much she screamed at him to stop.

"What makes you think I'm going to marry you?" she asked in a tone of simple curiosity.

"Because I'm the only one who will have you. I made sure of it," he said with calm satisfaction. "Every man within a hundred miles who can get a hard-on knows if he comes near you, I'll beat him to bloody rags with my bare fists. So nobody's been scratching that itch between your legs. Getting hungry, baby doll? I sure as hell am."

Hope wanted to point out that Rio had been the exception to Turner's rule of driving men away, but she held her tongue. She sensed that bringing up Rio would change a frightening situation into a desperate one.

"See," Turner continued, "two years ago, when you came back here to live, you ignored me, so I knew you were still mad because of that hundred-dollar bill I

stuffed down your blouse. That's why you went away to the big city and turned into a real classy piece of ass, something worth a lot more than a hundred bucks. You were real mad at me."

Hope kept on fixing her dinner even though the churning of her stomach told her she wouldn't be eating anything for a while.

"You looked better than ever when you came back, but you wouldn't give me the time of day." Turner shrugged massively. "Hey, fine. I had lots of time and lots of women to play with. I could wait." He smiled widely. "You know, I kind of liked waiting. Most women bore me after I fuck them. But with you I could lie in bed and think of how many ways I'd do it to you. I never got bored."

The shudder of revulsion that went through Hope didn't escape Turner. He smiled, misreading her now as he had always misunderstood her in the past.

"Turns you on, huh?" he said, hooking his thumbs through his belt loops. "Yeah, me, too. Come here, baby doll. I've got something in my pants for you."

"No."

"Hey." He smiled hugely and held up his hands as though she had a gun on him. "My intentions are strictly honorable. I won't touch you until we're married, if that's the way you want it."

"That's the way I want it," she said instantly.

"Then move your ass, baby doll. There's a man in town who'll have us married before you can say—"

"No," she cut in.

"What do you mean?" he said, exasperated.

"Just that. N. O. No." Hope looked at Turner and spoke calmly despite the fear prowling through her, shaking her as the wind shook the house, howling. "Don't you understand yet?" she asked with a calmness that was balanced on the brittle edge of desperation. "You only want me because you can't have me. You said it yourself. Women bore you. I'll bore you, too."

"No, you won't. You're the only woman who ever said no to me and made it stick. C'mon," he said impatiently, holding out his thick hand to her. "Let's go to town."

"No."

The hand became a big fist. "Listen, I'm getting real goddamn tired of hearing *no* from you. The game is over. Rio's sniffing around, and he's got too damn many women hot for him. He'll get you to spread your legs, too. I've thought it over real careful. I was going to come here and beat that son of a bitch until he can't ever get it up again. Then I saw him in town and decided to settle some things with you first. I'm going to fuck you until you can't even think of saying no anymore. Got that, baby doll?"

Hope looked from Turner's flushed face to the fist he had unconsciously made of the hand he had held out to her. She wondered if he had been drinking, then decided it didn't matter. He hadn't had enough alcohol to slow him down, which was all that mattered to her.

For an instant she thought longingly of the rifle in the water truck. No one had guessed that she would be cornered by a snake in her own kitchen. But then,

no one had guessed that she would be so alone, so vulnerable.

The back door had never looked farther away. All that was left was to go along with Turner's "offer" of marriage until they got to town, where she would run for the first open door she saw.

Then Hope measured the flat light in Turner's eyes and realized that he wouldn't wait until town to rape her. He had been content with his coarse fantasies as long as he knew that she wasn't interested in any man. But now Rio was around.

Turner wasn't going to let her get away. Not tonight.

Hope's hazel glance flickered again to the back door.

"You start running and you aren't going to like it when I catch you," Turner said, following her glance. "I'll like it, though. I'll like it a whole lot."

The chill wind moaned and blew over the land, buffeting the house.

Hope wanted nothing more than to be as wild and free as that wind. And as safe.

Mentally she went over the drop from her bedroom window to the sloping roof of the back porch and from there to the ground. The wind would cover any sounds she made. She could be in the pasture, up on Aces, and over the back fence before Turner caught on.

"I'll need to change my clothes before we get married in town," she said calmly.

Turner cocked his head as though listening to the wind. His opaque eyes looked her over, seeing through the soft caftan to the curving, softer flesh beneath.

"Sure thing, babe. I'll just come along and watch.

Sort of an appetizer, see? I'll even get in a bite or two," he added, surging forward and reaching for the slit in her caftan. "Right about *here*."

She twisted away to keep her legs beyond the reach of his clutching hand, but she wasn't quite fast enough. His fingers grabbed the caftan below her waist. The lush green material bunched in his fist.

Hands braced on the counter behind her, Hope stood very still. If she moved, she would arouse his predatory instincts even more. He liked women to fight him. They were so easy to defeat, so soft, and their smooth skin showed every mark of his victory.

"Is this what your word is worth?" she asked with a calm that went no deeper than her cold skin. "You said you wouldn't touch me until we were married."

"Does that mean you finally decided to marry me?" he asked carelessly.

Slowly, as though in a nightmare, Hope felt the handle of the boning knife pressing against the edge of her palm.

"It's about time," Turner continued. Almost absently his huge fist crushed the velvet fabric, pulling on it, playing with her. He was strong enough to have her in an instant, but then the game would be over. "I'm tired of jumping through hoops for you. First the mortgage, then the water, and you still keep saying no."

She spoke carefully, trying to bring reason to a situation that was unraveling into terror. "I borrowed the money from Cottonwood Savings and Trust. One year, interest only, the land and buildings as collateral. Nothing was said about you."

"The bank is owned by my aunt, and I'm her fa-

vorite nephew. If it hadn't been for me, you'd have been turned down flat." The big fist twisted very slowly, wrapping the green velvet more tightly around his fingers, dragging Hope closer. "I didn't figure you'd make more than one or two payments before you went belly-up. I was going to step in and buy your ranch. Then you were going to earn it back one trick at a time, like any other whore."

"I've made every payment." Her voice was so controlled that it was almost toneless.

"Yeah," he said in disgust. His fist twisted harder, tightening more fabric around his fingers, pulling her closer. "You sure as hell did. Bill Worth says you've got money saved up for the balloon, too."

Unable to force sound past the fear closing her throat, Hope let the wind speak for her in a low, endless cry of despair.

"Well, shit, baby doll," he said in exasperation. "You don't leave a man enough room to swing his cock, do you? You won't even spread your legs for the water you've been taking. So I'm going to collect what's coming to me, starting *now*."

Turner yanked the fabric, throwing Hope off-balance, jerking her away from the counter before she could grab the knife. His thick arms pinned hers against her sides while his teeth ground against her lips. He backed up, dragging her with him, until the kitchen table pressed against his thighs. Then he lifted his head and grinned, humping his hips against her fast and hard.

"How about right here, baby doll. Just you and me and the big hard table."

Nausea turned over in Hope's stomach and clogged her throat. Her mind raced with frantic speed. She wanted nothing but to be free of Turner's touch, his smell, his obscene strength. With an effort of will that left her shaking, she smiled and lowered her eyelashes to keep him from seeing her revulsion. Deliberately she kicked off her fragile mules, getting ready to run at her first chance.

"How about in my bed?" she asked, her voice hoarse with fear rather than husky with desire. She doubted he would tell the difference. "I'd hate to get your fancy jeans all greasy."

He hesitated, surprised and disappointed by her unexpected surrender. On the other hand, it was what he had been waiting for. His arms loosened. "Well, if—"

She threw herself away from him with a strength that came from desperation. He staggered against the table, off-balance. Her right hand closed over the boning knife as she sprinted between the counter and the table, heading for the back door.

Turner moved with surprising speed for such a big man. He didn't manage to catch her, but he did cut off her escape.

She backed up rapidly, retreating from him. He didn't bother to follow. He simply stood with his legs braced far apart, admiring her flushed face and dark hair. He smiled with cruel anticipation.

"That's more like it, baby doll. I like a good run for my money." Then he saw the boning knife glittering in her hand. "Put it down. Fun's fun, but I'm not into knives."

"Then get the hell out of my kitchen."

Hope's voice was cold and empty, like the wind wrapping around the house in a sustained wail.

Turner hesitated before he smiled again, an ugly smile. With small movements of his body, he began closing the distance between them. "You won't do it."

She simply waited, knife in hand. She would do whatever she had to.

The expression on his face said that he was finally figuring that out.

"Last chance," he snapped. "Put it down."

She waited, watching. She knew just where she was going to put the knife.

So did he.

"*Bitch*. When I catch you, you'll wish to God you'd never even thought of it!"

The cry of the wind masked the heavy sound of Turner's boots against the floor as he closed in on Hope.

Seventeen



"I'M TEMPTED TO watch her castrate you."

Rio's voice was as cold and empty as the wind, as cold as his eyes watching Turner from just beyond the kitchen doorway.

The interruption was so unexpected that the big rancher simply stood and stared for a moment. Then he shook his head like a dog coming out of an icy rain.

Relief surged through Hope with a power that made her light-headed.

"But Hope isn't used to drawing blood," Rio drawled. "I am. I'm going to see what color yours is, Turner. I'm betting it's yellow."

With a smooth, predatory stride, Rio walked toward Turner, nakedly stalking him. There was strength and control in each clean movement of Rio's body.

And violence.

It radiated from the coiled perfection of each stride.

Hope backed away from Turner in a rush that took her beyond Rio to the living room.

"Go outside," Rio said calmly, not looking at her, watching Turner with eyes that were both savage and utterly controlled. "This won't take but a minute."

Before she could answer, Turner charged into the living room with his arms spread wide to drag everyone down. She threw herself to the side even as Rio gave her a hard shove, removing her from Turner's reach. Her knees hit the couch and she fell on it in a sprawl that sent the knife flying out of her hand. The blade slid hilt-deep into a cushion.

The instant it had taken to push Hope to safety left Rio at Turner's mercy. He was knocked off-balance by the rancher's massive tackle. They crashed to the floor with a force that shook the room.

As Turner had in so many bar brawls with smaller men, he used his superior weight and muscle to flatten his opponent. Straddling Rio, he smiled and cocked a huge fist, preparing to beat the man beneath him into a bloody rag.

Hope struggled upright and looked frantically around for the knife. She spotted the handle, grabbed it, and turned around just in time to see Turner's fist start down.

It never reached Rio.

With an upward sweep of his left arm, Rio knocked aside the blow. His right hand made an unusual fist, middle knuckle extended. With a deadly, twisting movement at the moment of impact, he rammed a shot straight to Turner's heart.

Before the rancher went white at the pain exploding through his chest, the callused edge of Rio's open left hand connected with Turner's thick neck in a short, brutal chopping motion. With a low sound, the big man slipped sideways and flopped facedown on the living room floor.

Rio came to his feet in a flowing, catlike movement. "Hope? Are you all right?"

"I—Rio?" she asked, disbelief in her wide eyes.

The violence had happened so fast that she was having trouble understanding that it was over. Rio had moved so quickly, so lethally, no more than a handful of seconds from the moment Turner tackled them. Even with what Mason had told her, she hadn't expected Rio to be so deadly against the much bigger rancher. Turner had earned his reputation as a brutal, boots-and-bare-knuckle brawler.

Rio took the knife from Hope's slack fingers and set it on the lamp table. He knelt in front of her, searching her face with blue eyes so dark they were almost black.

"Are you all right?" he asked urgently. "He didn't have time to hurt you, did he? I saw him drive out of town. He turned toward the Valley of the Sun, not his own ranch. I got here as fast as I could."

Abruptly reaction hit Hope. She began to tremble violently. Tears spilled out of her eyes. Her skin went pale. Her breath came in short gasps that couldn't get enough oxygen into her lungs.

Rio saw blood welling from a cut on her lip and knew that Turner had caused it.

Hope saw the change in Rio's eyes, the blackness of

violence wholly unleashed. With a guttural sound he turned toward the man lying unconscious on the floor.

"No," she said quickly. Her cold fingers closed over Rio's arm. The bunched hardness of his muscles shocked her. It was like grabbing a steel fence post. "He didn't—do anything."

Rio searched her face, hearing both the truth and the desperation in her broken words. He looked away from the tiny drops of blood on her pale lips. A fierce emotion went through him, cutting him, making him bleed even as she bled.

"Hope," he said softly.

He ached to touch her and knew he shouldn't. If he touched her, he would make love to her, kissing away even the memory of brutality, caressing her with his lips and his tongue and his body until she trembled and wept with ecstasy instead of fear.

Turner's low groan echoed the sound of the wind, rough and empty of meaning.

Rio slanted the man a single feral look. Then he closed his eyes and fought to keep himself from curling his long fingers around Turner's throat and squeezing until there was nothing left of the rancher but a mound of cooling meat.

Violence had never tempted Rio so much.

Flexing his fingers, fighting a savage need to destroy, he turned away from the man who would have raped Hope. For a few terrible moments, Rio wasn't sure he could let Turner live.

Self-control had never been so hard before, not even when he was young and as wild as a winter storm.

Hope whispered his name.

"It's all right." Rio forced calm into his voice instead of the violence that coiled within him, straining to be free. "I won't kill him."

Yet, Rio added silently.

Hope looked at him and heard what he hadn't said aloud. "No, Rio. Don't. Turner's not worth going to jail for."

"You are."

Before she could say anything more, Turner groaned again.

Rio moved with shocking speed. His fingers clamped around a thick arm. With an impatient jerk he rolled Turner over onto his back.

"Can you hear me?" Rio asked indifferently.

The other man's groan didn't tell Rio anything new. His palm smacked the bigger man's face with measured force.

Turner's eyes flew open. The instant his vision cleared enough to make out Rio, he lunged upward at him.

Rio wrapped his hands around the rancher's arms just above the elbows and used the bigger man's momentum to yank him to his feet. Steel fingers flexed and dug in like talons.

Waves of pain slammed up Turner's arms. He sagged and almost blacked out. The next time he looked at Rio, it was with dawning fear instead of rage.

Rio saw the change and nodded. "We're going to reach an understanding, you and me," he drawled, his voice mild and his eyes promising hell everlasting. His

fingers dug deeply into Turner's muscular flesh, grinding nerve against bone in a gesture that was punishment, warning, and promise in one. "You touch Hope again and I'll hurt you. Hear me?"

"All I hear is the wind, *drifter*," Turner said hoarsely.

He didn't say any more. He didn't have to. The knowledge that Rio wouldn't always be around to protect Hope was there in Turner's eyes.

It was there in Hope's, too, raw fear and regret.

"That's right," Rio said softly. "I'm the wind. I'm everywhere. I see everything. I hear everything. Nothing happens that I don't know. You touch Hope just once and you better start looking over your shoulder, living in your rearview mirror, locking your doors at night, and checking the locks again before you go to sleep. You better start going to church every Sunday and praying to God that you never see me again."

Turner's eyes widened. He stared at Rio through waves of pain and began to understand more than mere words could say. Rio's smile was as much a warning as the agonizing grip that was making the world go gray around the edges.

"But if you touch her, no locks and no God will save you," Rio said almost gently. "One day you'll hear the wind and you'll turn around and I'll be there. That's the day you die."

The unlatched front door banged open, pushed by a cold shout of wind.

Pivoting, Rio released Turner with a hard motion that sent the rancher smashing into the doorframe. He

pulled himself upright, took one look at Rio's face, and stumbled down the front steps and into his Jeep.

Cold fingers of wind raked through Rio's hair. He didn't feel it. He stood in the doorway, watching while the Jeep's headlights made a sweep of the yard and sped down the road until there was nothing left but a pinpoint of brightness.

Coils of wind hummed around and through the house, making the walls shiver.

Rio shut the door, turned, and saw that Hope was shivering, too. She came to her feet slowly, looking at him with eyes that were wide and very dark.

"I know you don't—" Her voice broke and she tried again. "I know you don't want to, but would you hold me, please?" She swayed, holding on to herself because there was no one else. "Please," she said desperately, scrubbing her face and arms with her hands. "I can't stand the feel of him on my skin any longer!"

With a hoarse sound Rio went to Hope, wrapped his arms around her, rocked her gently against his body.

He held her for long, long minutes, until her skin was warm beneath his hands and her body no longer shuddered with vicious memories. He felt her take a deep, ragged breath, and then felt her lean against his strength with a trust that made him want to cry out in despair.

"I would have used the knife," she said bleakly.

"I know." His voice was soft and certain as he smoothed his cheek against the dark satin of her hair.

"Do you?" she asked, tilting her face up to his.

"Yes. You're a one-man woman," Rio said, bending down to Hope. "And God help us both, *I'm that man.*"

He lowered his mouth to her trembling lips, kissing her with melting gentleness, cherishing her. The tip of his tongue caressed the cut on her lip.

"Even your blood is sweet," he whispered.

She made a low sound and swayed against him.

"Does that hurt?" he asked softly against her mouth, not lifting his head at all.

"No," she said in a low voice, watching him through half-closed eyes. "It feels . . ."

Her voice died. She shivered and moved her head very slowly from side to side, offering more of her mouth to him in a silent plea.

With tiny, hot movements of his tongue he caressed her lips, licking away every last bit of Turner's ugly embrace. She moaned and clung to Rio, letting his warmth and his tenderness fill her senses.

Her lips parted in a helpless invitation that he accepted with a deep sound of pleasure and need. His tongue stroked the inner softness of her mouth, tasting her while tiny shudders of desire rippled through his powerful body, passion surging hotly, threatening to strip away his control.

He shouldn't be holding her, touching her, tasting her on his tongue like a wild, sweet rain.

"Hope," he breathed against her mouth. And then again, urgently, "Hope, tell me to stop."

Her eyes opened, luminous with emotion. "I love you," she whispered, and her breath flowed warmly over his lips.

"God," Rio groaned, and he buried his face against her neck, unable to bear the radiant truth of her eyes. "I didn't want to hurt you," he said harshly.

"I know." Her voice was like her eyes, serene, certain.

"I don't have any past, any future, any present. *I am the wind.*"

"Yes," she said, turning to caress his cheek with her lips. "I know."

He straightened and confronted the extraordinary beauty of Hope's eyes. His hard, warm hands shaped her face.

"Then tell me to go," he said in a hoarse voice.

She smiled sadly. "Never, my love."

"Hope—"

"Kiss me," she interrupted, standing on tiptoe to reach his mouth.

"Hope, I don't—"

The soft heat of her lips, her tongue, drove every word from Rio's mind. He made a rough, low sound and took her mouth even as she took his. The gliding pressure of tongue over tongue became a wildness shaking him. He couldn't hold her close enough, taste her deeply enough, or control the hunger sweeping through him like a violent desert storm.

Before the kiss ended he was fully aroused, needing her as he had never needed a woman before. With an effort that left him shaking, he lifted his mouth from hers.

"No more," he said hoarsely.

Her luminous eyes searched his. "Why?"

His laugh was short, rough. He felt her warmth over every inch of his body, but most of all in the rigid flesh straining against his jeans. Against her. He moved his

hips once, slowly. The blunt, unmistakable ridge of male passion caressed her.

"That's why," he said almost angrily.

Hope's smile was like her body, invitation and incitement at once. "That's the best reason I can think of *not* to stop," she murmured, kissing the corners of his mouth, moving her hips against him in return.

"Hope—"

"I'm not asking you to stay with me forever," she interrupted, breathing her warmth into his mouth. "I'm not even asking you to say you love me. All I'm asking is to feel your life inside me. That's all, Rio. Just that. You. Inside me."

Her words wrenched a cry from him that was both harsh and infinitely sweet. He could no more resist the outpouring of her love than the land could resist a silver fall of rain. Without stopping to think or argue or deny, he lifted her into his arms. Her weight was as feminine and heady as her smile.

"You don't have to carry me off to the bedroom," she said. "I won't change my mind or run away."

"You sure?"

Smiling, savoring, she rubbed the palm of her hand over the hard muscles of his chest, the strong tendons of his neck, the line of his jaw. His head turned swiftly. Lovingly, his teeth captured the flesh at the base of her thumb. With sensuous finesse he bit down.

Desire lanced through her with a force that dragged a hoarse, surprised cry from her throat.

He repeated the caress, then sucked on the tender flesh.

"Run away? My God, I'd be lucky to stand up," she said raggedly. "You make me weak."

He heard the surprise in her voice, felt the quivers of need that coursed through her body. Smiling rather fiercely, he started up the stairs. Then he stopped without warning and looked down at Hope. His pupils were fully dilated, leaving only a crystal rim of midnight blue. He took her mouth with a hard thrust of his tongue and laughed aloud to feel the passion shaking her.

"Beautiful dreamer," he said huskily, and thrust into her again. "*God, how I want you.*" He lifted his head finally, all but crying out in protest at having to end the kiss. "I'm carrying you because I'm trying to slow myself down."

She searched his face, reading his hunger in every taut line, every harshly drawn breath. "Is it working?"

"What do you think?"

Hope smiled slowly. "I think your bedroom is closer than mine," she murmured, tracing the line of his jaw with the tip of her tongue.

His eyes closed for an instant while desire raged through him. "I think you're right."

He stopped and kissed her again, searching the hot textures of her mouth with slow strokes of his tongue. When he heard the sounds welling from deep in her throat, and from his, he wondered if he would be able to get enough of her even when he was buried in her.

Then he wondered if he would be able to wait to find out, or if he would take her right here, right now, on the stairway.

He was certain that she wouldn't protest if he turned

her in his arms and fitted her body over his, sheathing himself in her slick, passionate heat. Her willingness was plain in her hazel eyes dilated and dazed with hunger, in the way her lips opened beneath his kiss, wanting his tongue deep within her mouth.

Wanting him.

All I'm asking is to feel your life inside me. That's all, Rio. Just that. You. Inside me.

With a hoarse sound that could have been Hope's name, he dragged his mouth away from hers and went up the stairway with long, powerful strides. The door to his room was open. He kicked it shut behind him and carried her over to the bed. Then he stopped, still holding her, but not kissing her, not even looking at her.

Hope was afraid that he had changed his mind. She didn't want that. She wanted to belong to him in a way that she had belonged to no other man. Urgently she slid her fingers between the snaps on his shirt. The heat of his body was like a furnace burning her with the promise of strength and passionate need. Shivering with pleasure and hunger, she caressed him and felt the answering quiver of his body.

"You want me," she said huskily. "I can feel it. Why did you stop?"

He gave her a crooked smile that made her ache. "You've driven me crazy."

"What do you mean?"

"I can't even let go of you long enough to undress you."

Hope would have smiled, but the hunger she felt for Rio was too close to pain. Her fingers shook as she

reached for the long zipper that lay hidden beneath a front fold of the caftan. The zipper made a soft, secret sound as she opened it.

He watched with dark, hungry eyes while green fabric fell away from skin that was both softer and hotter than velvet. She shrugged away some of the cloth, revealing the creamy curves and dark rose peak of one breast. The nipple pouted and grew tighter as he looked, begging for his tongue, his teeth, his mouth.

Slowly, with an aching kind of control, he turned Hope in his arms and allowed her legs to slide down over him. The changing pressure of her body against his arousal made him shiver with raw pleasure.

He didn't let go of her. He couldn't. He lifted her until her breast was level with his mouth. With small, slow movements of his head, he brushed his lips over her nipple and felt the passionate trembling of her response. Even as she cried out his name, asking for him, he drew her deeply into his mouth, caressing her as though he was drawing life itself from her. Then he lost himself in the taste of her and she lost herself in the feel of his mouth so hot and knowing on her breast.

It was a long time before he released her, long enough for her to be shuddering, long enough for her skin to become as hot as his, as misted with passion.

He wanted to open his jeans and bury himself in her right where they stood.

He wanted to lie down with her, take her so slowly she would be crying and wild before they were halfway joined.

He wanted it fast and hard, slow and sweet, violent

and serene. He wanted everything with her, more than he had ever wanted from any woman. The depth of his need would have frightened him if he had room in his mind for anything but Hope.

When he put her on the bed, the caftan fell open at the slit. One slender leg gleamed between green velvet folds. Her exposed breast quivered as she breathed, its tip taut and glistening from his hungry mouth. She smiled up at him with lips still hot from his kisses, wanting him.

He had never seen anything more beautiful, not even the land itself.

Eighteen



WITH HANDS THAT ached to touch Hope, Rio tore impatiently at his own shirt, undoing the steel snaps in a single ripping sound. His leather belt hissed as he jerked it through denim loops. The rest of his clothes quickly dropped to the floor until he stood naked before her, fighting to slow himself down yet unable to control the hunger that made his breath short and his arousal pulse hotly with every rapid heartbeat.

He saw her look at him, all of him, accepting him without hesitation or fear. When he heard her murmuring sound of admiration he thought he would lose control right there. She was destroying him and she didn't even know it.

Her trembling fingers traced a line from his waist to his thigh. Curiously she touched the thrusting evidence of his desire. He clenched his hands and groaned with pleasure. When her fingers curled softly, sweetly around him, sweat gathered and ran down his spine.

"You're killing me," he said hoarsely.

She gave him a startled look. "Am I too rough?"

He gave a crack of laughter. "My beautiful dreamer. Don't you know? Right now you could skin me with a dull knife and I'd beg for more."

He lifted her fingers to his mouth, biting them sweetly and then rubbing them across his chest, his nipples, his belly. But he couldn't bear being without her taste for more than a few seconds. He lifted her hands and bit them again, groaning with raw hunger. He had just enough restraint not to leave more than fleeting marks of passion on her skin. But he wanted to.

And she wanted him to.

She wanted him with an intensity that made her twist and tremble and utter small, wild sounds that ate at the core of his control.

"I want to be gentle," he said through his teeth. "Help me."

Gracefully she shrugged away the green velvet folds of her caftan. When he saw that she wore nothing beneath the cloth but a flush of desire spreading across her smooth, pale skin, he nearly went to his knees.

His dark hands stroked from her lips to her toes, wanting all of her, shaking with the wanting. Finally his fingers tangled in the dark curls between her thighs. Gently he slid one finger partway between her soft, hot folds, silently asking if she was as ready for him as he was for her.

She was slick, hot, wet, and very tight.

He knew then that she wanted him—and that it had been a long, long time since she had been with a man.

The knowledge both excited and chastened him. With two fingers he delicately, teasingly, moved within her. He went just far enough that she knew he was there, just enough to stretch her, but not nearly deep enough for either one of them.

Her hips lifted, following his touch as she had followed his kiss. He laughed softly and circled the hot nub that was no longer hidden, but begging openly for his caress. She gasped, shivered, and watched him with smoldering eyes. He watched her the same way, burning, as he bent down and kissed her, caressed her, teased her, tasted her until she cried out and melted for him.

"Sweet," he said in a low voice, watching her, tasting her. "So damned sweet. No woman has ever burned for me like you."

He took a deep, racking breath and forced himself to look away from the heat welling out of her in gentle pulses.

She breathed his name and opened even more, needing him.

Abruptly he knew he couldn't wait any longer. He turned and grabbed blindly for his jeans.

"Rio?" She watched him with hungry eyes, afraid that he was going to pull on his clothes and leave her lonely and aching.

He saw her fear, and her need. He kissed her in swift, steamy reassurance.

"It's all right, dreamer," he said, biting her lips softly while he tore open the tiny package he had found in his jeans. "I'll take care of it."

When Hope realized what he was unwrapping, she shook her head. She didn't want that. She wanted him. All of him. Everything he could give. If that meant his baby, too, she would be the luckiest woman on earth.

"No," she said quickly, covering his fingers with her own. "You don't need to. It's all right. Please. I don't want anything between us. *Nothing.*"

He looked into eyes that were both burning and clear. A shudder of raw pleasure went down his spine at the thought of being truly naked within her. She hadn't been with any man for so long that she was as tight as a virgin, yet she had wanted him enough to protect herself in advance, freeing both of them from the sensual restrictions of a condom. That kind of freedom was something he had never permitted himself with any woman.

"Are you sure?" he asked. "I'm used to it. I always . . ."

His voice faded as he watched her lean toward him until her lips brushed over the heartbeat that pulsed visibly through his thick, rigid sex.

"I want you," she said. "I want this. Naked."

The touch of her tongue made him jerk. The foil packet fell from his shaking fingers to the floor. He uncoiled with a powerful movement that pressed her back onto the bed.

"Woman," he said thickly, "so much woman."

His whole body was hard with the force of restraining the hunger that shot through him with every motion of her lips brushing over him. His need of her raged like lightning through his body.

She trembled and opened to him, yielding a hot rain of pleasure as his fingers again found the secrets hidden within her softness. He had never wanted anything as much as he wanted to take her in that searing, endless instant when pleasure melted her.

Yet he was sure he would hurt her if he did. For all her heat, for all her need, she was still so tight he could barely ease two fingers into her.

He rolled over onto his back, pulling her with him, lifting her until her beautiful legs were pressed alongside his. Hard hands caressed from her shoulders down her back, kneading her hips, rubbing her softly against him until she shivered and shared her passion with him in a rain of hot silk. Need raked through him, white-hot, violent.

"Take me, Hope," he said hoarsely, easing just a small part of himself inside her. "Take as much or as little as you want. It's the only way I won't hurt you."

She looked down at his rigid flesh pressing gently into her. Pleasure swept through her in expanding, liquid pulses. She shared them with him, moving against his arousal, making him as slick and hot as she was.

"I can't imagine anything hurting with you," she said, watching him with eyes that knew only love.

"Dreamer," he said hoarsely, "beautiful dreamer."

His breath broke in a groan as her soft, passionate heat caressed him again. Involuntarily he closed his eyes, giving himself to her, losing himself in her.

Then he opened his eyes and moved in return, watching her with eyes that had no blue, only the dark glitter of desire. He felt her begin to ease more

of herself onto him, more and then more. But still she was tight, a sweet, slick fist squeezing him. Small, too small. It had been too long for her since her last man.

"I'll hurt you," he said through clenched teeth.

"Not much. I'm told it's a very fragile piece of skin."

Sweat broke out all over Rio's body as he realized that he had been wrong. It hadn't been a long time since Hope had been with a man. It had been forever.

She had never given herself before, to any man.

Ecstasy swept through him in a searing silver rain.

"My God," he groaned, "I wonder which one of us is dreaming now."

The only answer was her heat closing over him, retreating, then advancing again, more deeply with each motion.

He wanted to put his hands on her hips and thrust into her, burying himself completely in her tight satin heat, ending the exquisite torment. All that prevented him was the intense pleasure that transformed her face each time she moved over him. Eyes closed, generous mouth taut, she came to him with the same abandoned grace he had seen when she'd arched herself to the sky and let water pour from her cupped hands.

"I want all of you," she whispered against his lips, straining to be as close to him as a woman could be to a man. "Help me, Rio. Help *us*."

He looked at her flushed face and saw no fear, no hesitation. The simple truth of her words broke over him, shaking him. He felt her softness straining against the last barrier between them.

"Gently," he murmured. "Gently, my dreamer."

His fingers caught her hard nipples, caressing her, sending exquisite lightning through her. He let the storm build, piling caress upon caress until he felt pleasure burst inside her. At that instant he thrust once, deeply, sweeping away the barrier between them. Then he retreated again, fearful of hurting her any more.

Hope followed his retreat, sliding over him, sheathing him deeply in her body. They both cried out in fierce pleasure, wanting it to last forever, to live and die feeling only the unbearably sweet instant when she first measured his full power.

He was no longer the wind. He was as hard and as hot and as hungry for rain as the desert itself. He could feel the storm coming now, feel it sweeping out from him, feel himself on the brink of—

His hands clamped over her hips, holding her absolutely still.

"Don't move," he said hoarsely, fighting for control of the storm they had created. "It's too soon. You aren't ready."

Slowly she opened her eyes and looked down at the man she loved. Every muscle in his body was rigid, hot, gleaming with sweat. He filled her mind, her heart, her body, and she wanted nothing more than to bring him a pleasure as wild and as true as her love for him.

He could hold her hips prisoner, but there was nothing he could do about the deep, involuntary movements of her body as she looked down at him with love in her eyes.

He groaned. "Don't—"

And then he could say no more. Hope was all around him, tugging sleekly at him, and he gave himself to her as though she was the wind calling his name.

She closed her eyes, savoring Rio's release, feeling the most intense pleasure of her life as the man she loved pulsed within her. She kissed his hot skin, breathed in his unique male scent, tasted the salt of passion. Smiling dreamily, she lay on his chest, content to listen to his heart beating wildly beneath her cheek.

When Rio could breathe again his hands slowly traveled from Hope's tangled hair down her spine to the warm curve of her hips, and from there to the secret cleft between. His fingertips brushed over sultry flesh, making her breath catch.

The sensitivity of her own body surprised her. She lifted her head and looked into his midnight-blue eyes. He moved against her, within her, smiling up at her with male intent.

"Rio?" she asked, not understanding. She had felt his climax. She was certain that he was satisfied.

"Did you think I would leave you hungry?"

Hope could only shake her head. "You haven't," she said simply, still not understanding. "I've never felt more pleasure than I did with you just now."

As Hope's words sank in, a hot shudder of desire stitched down the length of Rio's body. She had never had more pleasure—and he hadn't even begun to make love to her. The thought tore at him with the honeyed claws of ecstasy barely restrained.

"I've never lost control with a woman before," he said in a gritty, rueful voice, "and damned if you aren't taking me right up to the edge all over again."

"I don't understand."

"You will," he promised.

Without separating their bodies, he rolled her over onto her back and fitted his mouth to hers.

And then he loved her.

It was like being caught in a hot, gentle whirlwind. Hope felt his tongue thrusting sensually into her mouth even as his hands found the satin weight of her breasts. He caught her nipples between his fingers and tugged. Lightning streaked through her. She moaned and her body moved reflexively, tightening around him.

He laughed with sheer male pleasure.

The sound was another stroke of lightning taking her body by storm. She twisted up against him, needing the feel of his flesh buried inside her. He laughed again before he bent his head and drank the sounds that rippled from her. His fingertips closed on her hard nipples and tugged while hot waves of pleasure washed through her to him, a sensual yielding that was also a feminine demand.

He shifted one hand to the lush curve of her bottom, flexing his fingers against her resilient hip. His words were a dark wind surrounding her, telling her what she felt like, tasted like, what he wanted from her, what he would give to her in return; and through it all his hands stroked and tugged and burned over her, teaching her more than she had ever dreamed about sensual hunger and response.

"Rio," she said breathlessly, "I—"

The word became a cry as his hand slid between their joined bodies, finding and caressing the slick, pouting knot. He felt her sudden tension, her breath stopping within her, her nails digging into his back. He laughed softly, hotly, confidently, like his fingers stroking her, taking her to the edge and then holding her there poised and shivering on the brink of release.

She made a ragged sound that was his name and a question, surprise and something close to fear. She felt her own body being seduced from her control, a storm at the instant of breaking, her nerves a violent network of lightning straining to be free. Instinctively she held back, uncertain.

"Dreamer," he said huskily, caressing Hope, "come to me."

She cried aloud and she gave herself to the storm, to Rio, holding nothing back, knowing ecstasy for the first time in her life. It swept through her like a long, wild wind, shaking her to her soul.

She held on to him, crying, and he held her, kissing away the sweet rain of tears. Blindly she clung to him while her lips caressed his neck, his chest, the hard nub of his nipple. She was drowning in ecstasy, in him, and she whispered her love with each breath she took.

He heard her words, felt the tiny wild movements of her body, and control began slipping away from him again. He fought the whirlwind of desire spiraling up from their joined bodies, making him fill her until each of her breaths was a separate caress over him. He wanted to hold himself back, to protest that he wasn't

like this, that no woman had ever aroused him until he wanted to scream with it, but even that primitive release was denied because his throat was as tight around his words as she was around him.

"I wondered on the stairway if I could get enough of you," he said finally, his voice low and gritty, as intimate as his movements deep within her body. He bit her shoulder with fierce restraint. "I don't think I can. Have you had enough of me?"

Her only answer was a sharp cry as anticipation coiled impossibly, hotly, within her again. Lightning strokes of new pleasure ripped through her before the aftershocks of her first ecstasy had fully stilled. She tried to say his name but couldn't. She could only feel his presence inside her.

He filled her, all of her, leaving room for nothing except the hot silver rains sweeping over her once again. This time she didn't hesitate in surprise or fear. She knew that he was waiting for her within that torrential passion. And then she was with him, holding him hard and close while ecstasy broke around them, consuming them.

It was a long time before the sensual storm passed, leaving them spent, gleaming with moisture, their bodies tightly intertwined.

Rio kissed and caressed Hope gently, cherishing her. He had never known such wild, intense pleasure with a woman. He hadn't even believed it was possible. She was like a new land opening before him, a new wind calling his name.

"Hope," he whispered.

He wanted to say more, but was able only to say her

name again and again. His mouth opened on her lips, asking for a greater intimacy. When she answered with a gliding pressure of her tongue, he caught it almost hungrily.

Rio didn't understand his need, for it wasn't sexual hunger driving him. He felt like a man racing to catch the wind, to hold it, to absorb it so completely into himself that he would never be separate again.

So he held her, surrounding her, letting her drift asleep within the cradle of his arms.

He didn't sleep. He couldn't. He lay and watched moonlight bathe Hope in unearthly silver beauty. And when he could control himself no longer, he began touching her with his hands and his lips and his tongue.

She woke slowly, languidly, murmuring Rio's name and her love while his mouth caressed her lips, her neck, her breasts, her body, moving over her like his brother the wind, learning each of her soft secrets. Long before he came to her she was crying and twisting against his unbearably knowing mouth, lost in the ecstasy shaking her.

Even then he didn't take her. He simply, hungrily, began all over again, memorizing her, leaving none of her hot skin untasted, knowing all of her, cherishing her with a primal sensuality that shattered her.

That was when he took her, when his name was a wild cry on her lips.

It was her name, too, his broken cry against her mouth, their voices intertwined as deeply as their moonlit bodies.

Nineteen



THE NEXT DAY Hope awoke to the fragrance of rain flowers drifting softly over her skin. She opened her eyes and saw bright yellow blossoms falling from Rio's hand.

His smile was as warm as the sunrise flooding the room with shades of gold and rose. Kissing her lips gently, he pulled the covers back up to her neck, concealing the womanly allure of her body. His hands curved around the blanket and her breasts.

"Last night taught me that I have no willpower where you're concerned, so I'm going to put all your temptations out of my sight."

"Why?" she asked sleepily, winding her arms around his neck. "If you give in, I won't be nearly so tempting to you afterward, will I?"

Laughing almost roughly, he disentangled her arms, kissing every inch of them along the way. He bit her palms and touched the sensitive skin between her fingers with the tip of his tongue.

"The more I have you," he said, closing his teeth over each of her fingertips in turn, "the more I want you. If I give in, the only explorations that get done on the ranch today will be done in this bed."

Hope's hazel eyes kindled. "What a lovely thought," she murmured, curling her fingers around his, tugging him down toward her.

"Does that mean you don't want to go riding with me?"

Amusement curved her lips.

"Let me rephrase that," he said quickly. "I've got a very interesting prospect for a well site. Do you want to go over it with me?"

Her sleepy, sensual humor evaporated. "Do you mean that? Have you really found a place to drill for water?"

"I don't know. So far things look good. I was going to check it out yesterday, but I went into town instead." He watched her with searching, intense eyes, wondering how she felt toward him in the clear light of another day.

Hope's smile faded as she remembered why Rio had left yesterday. He hadn't wanted to be her lover.

And now he was.

"Hope," he began, seeing shadows in her eyes.

"No," she cut in, her fingers over his lips. "I know you didn't want to be my lover. But it happened. I don't expect you to change. Don't expect me to change, either. I love you, Rio. Nothing will change that."

He gave her a swift, fierce kiss, then left the room

like it was on fire. He didn't trust himself to touch her anymore without sweeping away the blankets and knowing again the searing ecstasy of her body joined with his, her cries rippling through all of his silences.

Yesterday she had been a virgin. Today she was his woman. Tomorrow . . .

Tomorrow belonged to the wind. He would face it when he had to. Until then, today beckoned, radiant with Hope.

"Your bath is two feet deep and steaming," Rio called as he went down the stairs. "By the time you're dressed, I'll have breakfast ready."

"Where are we going?" Hope asked as she got out of bed. She shivered when her warm bare feet hit the cold bare floor.

"Ain't telling," he drawled.

She laughed at his laconic imitation of Mason. Then she raced for the hot welcome of a bath. She lingered, soaking out every small ache of the body she and Rio had so thoroughly enjoyed.

Finally she couldn't resist the smell of breakfast. Without looking, she stood and reached for a towel. The rack was empty. The nearest towel supply was in the linen closet down the hall. The cold hall.

Just as she nerved herself up for a chilly dash to the linen closet, the bathroom door opened. Rio's hand appeared. A thick, soft towel dangled from his fist.

"Missing something?" he asked.

"Brrr," she answered.

He came in and closed the door behind him so that the steamy warmth couldn't escape. Then he held the

towel wide in silent invitation. She stepped into it, and his arms. He kissed her until it was impossible to know whether her flushed skin came from the hot bath or from the even hotter passion he called from her.

"That's what *I* was missing," he said huskily. Then he lifted his head and put her away from his hungry, insistent body. "If I don't stop right now, neither one of us is going to be in any shape to get on a horse."

"Especially if the horse is Storm Walker," she said, smiling at him with trembling lips.

"I think I'll leave that tough old son in the corral today," Rio admitted. "I suspect he has more hard in him this morning than I do."

When Hope looked down Rio's body, she saw the unmistakable bulge pushing against his jeans. A shiver of pleasure coursed through her when she remembered the beauty of his body beneath her hands. In the wake of memory came the rushing, liquid heat that had become familiar last night. Slowly, murmuring approval, she moved her hand over the length of his arousal.

His breath broke. "I thought you would be sore."

She shook her head.

His hand slid up between her legs. The hungry, molten silk that waited for him was a revelation. His breath broke as his heartbeat doubled.

"You sure?" he asked, stroking her, watching for any sign that she was flinching away.

She shifted, opening to his touch. The hot pulse of her response on his fingers said that she was ready for him.

"I want you to be able to ride," he said.

Yet even as he spoke, he caressed her, drawing more of her liquid silk to him.

Her eyelids trembled down as an exquisite thrill of pleasure rippled through her. "I'll tie a pillow to the saddle."

He laughed and sank to his knees. "That won't be necessary."

The sultry, wild whirlwind of his mouth closed over her. When she was trembling and crying, he pulled her down and let the storm take them both. By the time it was spent, he lay fully clothed on the cold floor with her over him like a blanket. Smiling, he stroked her back.

"I must be crushing you," Hope said.

He laughed, and in laughing moved inside her.

"Mmm," she purred. "That feels good."

His heartbeat quickened again. "Better get up, dreamer. We have a well to find."

She kissed his jaw, sighed, and struggled into a sitting position astride him.

His breath caught. "Hope?"

"Mmm?"

He lifted her off his quickening flesh. "Get out of here or neither one of us will be able to walk, much less ride."

She looked at Rio, saw that he was still hard, and said, "Why don't I just drag you fully dressed into that tub? It's still hot."

For an instant Hope thought he was going to let her—and so did he.

With a wrench that was almost painful, he stood and tucked himself back into his jeans. He started to say

something, shook his head ruefully, and got out of the steamy intimacy of the bathroom.

"Breakfast is ready," he said from the safety of the hallway. *And so am I.*

Again.

His response to Hope kept taking Rio by surprise, like finding an artesian spring in the middle of a vast desert waste. The spring shouldn't be there. All logic and experience were against it. But there it was just the same, pure and sweet and inexhaustible, pulsing with rhythms that were deeper than logic and experience, as deep as life itself.

By the time Hope dressed and walked into the kitchen, Rio had filled two plates with mounds of hotcakes, ham, and eggs. She measured the huge breakfast and looked at him in silent protest.

"You'll be glad for every bite by lunchtime," he said.

She ate without arguing. She knew he was right. Besides, she was unusually hungry. When she tucked the last morsel of hotcake neatly into her mouth and looked up from her plate, he was smiling at her.

Rio touched the fullness of her lower lip, licked his fingertip, and said, "Sweet."

"Syrup always is," she pointed out reasonably, smiling at him with love in her eyes.

He shook his head slowly. "Not syrup. You." He sighed and pushed his chair back from the table. "Let's go before my good intentions hitch a ride on the wind. Again."

"You never told me where we were going."

"You distracted me."

"Good for me. Was it good for you?"

He laughed. "You know it was. Wind Canyon."

Smiling, Rio poured the rest of the coffee into a canteen, tossed a paper bag full of sandwiches to Hope, put his arm around her shoulders, and walked out into the sun-filled morning. Leaning lightly against him, she slid her arm around his waist. Her long legs kept pace with clean, graceful movements.

"I'm not a bit sore," she said, grinning. "Must be all those years of riding."

He gave a crack of laughter, kissed her swiftly on the lips, and lifted her over the pasture fence. He watched while she caught Aces, swung up bareback on the mare, and rode to the fence. The elegance of Hope's legs was clear even when they were covered by worn jeans and scuffed cowboy boots. He kept remembering how it felt when those long legs had wrapped around him, holding him tightly within her silky heat.

"You have beautiful legs," he said when she rode close.

She looked at him, startled. Then she smiled, slid off Aces, and picked up a curry comb.

"My legs are how I got the money to keep the ranch alive," Hope said as she worked. "Shoes, hosiery, and slit-to-mid thigh bedroom stuff was my specialty. The green caftan came from one of my last modeling assignments. I love the way it makes me feel."

Rio half-closed his eyes. The memory of her silky, beautiful body glowing against the deep green velvet was a pleasure so acute it was almost pain.

"So you take it out and wear it when nobody is around," he said huskily.

"Except for last night." Hope shuddered. "Turner knew I'd be here alone. He saw you in town."

"I know. One of the clerks in the hardware store told me that John Turner took one look at me through the window, reversed direction, and set off out of town like the hounds of hell were after him." Rio's eyes changed, becoming as hard as blue-black stone.

"I'm glad you came back," she said simply.

"Not half as glad as I am." Emotions vibrated in his voice, a volatile mixture of rage at Turner, anger at himself, and a hunger for Hope so intense that it still could shake him.

With a muttered word, Rio went to the barn. He emerged in a few minutes, leading Dusk. The mare headed toward the horse trailer that had been unhitched from Rio's pickup and parked beside the barn. Dusk's movements were the automatic reaction of a horse accustomed to being trailered all over the West as her owner went from town to town, ranch to ranch, horizon to horizon.

"Not yet, girl," Rio said, draping the roping rein over the corral railing. "First we've got a well to find."

Hope had watched the horse turn toward the trailer, heard Rio's casual words, and now a cold wind was keening through her soul.

Not yet.

But it would happen. There was no question, no doubt, nothing in Rio's voice but a calm certainty that he would leave.

Leaning against Aces, Hope struggled to control the storm of grief shaking her. *You knew he was going to leave*, she told herself fiercely. *Last night didn't change that. Tonight won't change it.*

Nothing will change it.

You've fallen in love with the wind, and you knew it even while you were falling.

She had no complaints coming, and accepted it. The choice had been hers every step of the way. Rio hadn't wanted to be her lover.

Hope. Tell me to stop. I didn't want to hurt you! I don't have any past, any future, any present. Hope, I don't—

Then she had kissed him, wanted him, and he had given her all he could. It was more than any other man had given her: tenderness and fierce passion, serenity and wild ecstasy. She wouldn't throw Rio's gift in his face and say that it wasn't enough. He would blame himself. She knew it as certainly as she knew she loved him.

Are you cruel enough to make him hate himself? Hope asked herself harshly. *Is that your idea of loving him?*

After a few moments Hope straightened her shoulders and went back to grooming Aces with smooth motions of her arm. It wasn't long before she saddled the mare, led her out of the corral, and mounted swiftly, before Rio could help her, touch her.

Side by side the two horses loped along the dirt road. The wind blew fitfully, tearing puffs of dust from the land.

Rio kept glancing over at Hope, quick looks that were hidden within the shadow of his hat brim. Back at the corral he had seen intense unhappiness on her face. He had wanted to go to her, to hold her, to assure her that everything would be all right, that he would protect her from whatever she feared.

And then he had seen her gather herself, shaking off whatever had clawed at her.

He didn't know what had happened, or why. He only knew that for a moment Hope had been sliced open all the way to her soul.

He understood what that kind of pain was like, how unexpected it could be, how devastating. So he watched her, reassuring himself that she was truly all right.

Hope caught the indigo flash of Rio's glance and turned, smiling at him for a moment before she looked back over the velvet-shadowed hills glowing in the early sunlight. The peace of the morning and the rhythmic beat of hooves were like a benediction to her grieving soul.

Rio's eyes followed her glance. He was accustomed to such sunrises, such silence—but this time Hope was with him, sharing the quiet and the compelling land. Like the dawn itself, she had a quiet that pleased him. Other women he had known were hurt or frightened by his silence. They had demanded that he take their emotional temperature with constant conversation. He had hated that, hated being with someone so shallow that she changed temperature with each of his silences.

Leaning over, Rio ran his fingertip down the line of

Hope's jaw. She looked at him and smiled, her eyes almost golden in the rich morning light.

Hunger and something more powerful moved through him, something indescribable, as though a spring was pushing up from his soul and lapping gently outward, sweet water bringing life to everything that thirsted. Gently he touched Hope again, as though to reassure himself that she was real and he was real and the moment itself was real.

The two horses walked into the thick shadows slanting from Wind Canyon's broad mouth. In this place there was a long exhalation of air, an almost intangible stirring of the atmosphere that was always more apparent here than at any other canyon mouth on the ranch. It was as though something immense slept, and in sleeping, sighed deeply.

Hope glanced up the canyon where the old wagon road began to snake up into the heights. She grimaced and looked away, grateful that Rio hadn't wanted to go all the way to the abandoned mine.

"What are we looking for?" she asked.

"Nothing we can see."

She gave him a sideways glance. "That's going to make it difficult, isn't it?"

Rio tugged his hat more firmly around his head and almost smiled. "Look at Eagle Peak."

Dutifully Hope looked at the ragged mountain that had dominated the skyline of all her childhood mornings.

"What do you see?" he asked.

"Rock. Lots of it."

"Close your eyes. You'll see more that way."

She looked at him for an instant. Then she closed her eyes.

"Remember that sandwich we talked about?" he asked.

"The torn-up one with waterproof bread?"

"That's the one. Now, imagine the sandwich is whole. Imagine that it's slanted up toward the sky at a fairly shallow angle."

"Umm."

Rio looked at Hope. Her eyes were closed, her lashes almost black against her golden skin. He remembered the intriguing softness of her eyelashes against his lips, the scent of her when he rested his cheek between her breasts, and the heady taste of her passion.

Impatiently he yanked his wandering thoughts back to aquifers and Eagle Peak.

"Now, that peak is like a party sandwich with all kinds of fancy layers," he said. "Rocks like granite, quartzite, and slate are the waterproof strata. The meat of the sandwich is limestone laid down in ancient seas. The limestone doesn't vary much in thickness here, but the surrounding layers do. Granite intrusions can be only a few inches thick in some places, and hundreds or thousands of feet deep in others."

Hope frowned, eyes still closed as she visualized a rather lumpy, disorganized sandwich. "Then how do you know where to sink the well? If you start where granite is thousands of feet thick, you'll never get anything but worn-out drill bits and dry holes."

"That's why you go to the Colorado School of Mines and get a master's degree in hydrology," he said dryly. "It gives you a fighting chance of guessing right."

Her eyes flew open as she understood what he was saying. At some time in his past he had earned a master's degree from one of the foremost centers for the study of applied geology in the United States.

Hope watched Rio intently, hoping he would tell her more about himself, but he didn't seem to notice. He was looking at Eagle Peak with trained eyes that saw through the mixed layers of rock to the chance of water beneath.

"Not much limestone shows through on this side of the mountains," he said. "That's probably why your geologist gave up."

Silently Rio added, *That and the fact that his grandfather wasn't a Zuni shaman who taught a wild kid to be so still that he could feel clouds condensing around distant peaks and water flowing in the earth far beneath his feet.*

"He was real sure there wasn't any water," Hope said.

"He might be right. But there's limestone in those mountains. It shows high up in the most deeply eroded peaks over on the dry side of the Perdidas. Because limestone weathers away faster than other strata, it undermines the layers of rock that cover it. They crumble and collapse until the exposed limestone is all but buried by slides of harder stone."

Though Rio was looking up at the rugged mountains, she sensed that his focus was inward, deep down where knowledge, experience, and instinct arranged and rearranged the possibilities of the layers of rock.

“The limestone I saw could be just fragments of a stratum that has long since dissolved away,” he said. “Or it could be the tip of an aquifer that’s thousands of feet thick and has been soaking up water for millions of years.”

Her breath came in quickly and stayed, filling her until she ached. The thought of so much water waiting beneath her feet was almost unbearable.

“Is it?” she asked, her voice hungry, yearning. “Is there a layer of limestone filled with water for the Valley of the Sun, just waiting to be discovered?”

Twenty



RIO DISMOUNTED AND looked up at Hope. "That's why we rode to Wind Canyon," he said simply. "To decide if it's worth the gamble of drilling here."

"How will you do that?"

He hesitated, not wanting to explain what he didn't understand himself; he simply accepted. He had already done everything he could using conventional knowledge of geology and hydrology. He had narrowed the search to three possible sites. Of the three, Wind Canyon was by far the most likely.

Now he would walk the land, letting its silent messages seep into him. He would wait deep within himself, hoping to feel the rippling echo of water flowing beneath his feet. It was like tiny currents of electricity whispering through him, telling him that *something different* lay beneath his feet. Often the feeling was so subtle that it was easy to miss. Silence was required, silence and an inner stillness that had to come from his whole mind.

White men called what he was doing water witching or dowsing, and claimed not to believe in it. Despite that, many western wells had been found by men or women carrying peeled forked sticks that quivered and dipped in the presence of hidden water. His grandfather had called Rio's gift the breath of the Great Spirit.

Rio didn't call it anything at all. He accepted it, just as he accepted the color of his hair and the number of his fingers.

"Experience," he said finally, handing Dusk's rein to Hope. He loosened the saddle cinch with a few expert tugs. "That's how I decide. If the land feels right, I drill."

"And if it doesn't?"

"I move on until I find water or there's nowhere left to look."

He unbuckled the deep saddlebags he always brought with him and reached inside. After a moment he pulled out a pair of scarred hiking boots. Sitting on a convenient rock, he kicked off his cowboy boots and pulled on the others.

"I learned when I was young to trust my instincts," Rio said, quickly lacing up and tying the boots. "My grandfather was a good teacher."

She wanted to ask more questions, but Rio was already walking slowly away. He moved over the rocky canyon floor like a man looking for a faded trail. She sensed that it wasn't the dry surface of the ground he was concentrating on, but something else, something indescribable.

I learned when I was young to trust my instincts.

Silently Hope dismounted and loosened the cinch on her saddle. After a short search she found a flat, sun-washed rock to sit on. She didn't know how long he would be walking the land, but she sensed he didn't want any distractions.

In the cool hours of early morning, the sun felt good. Knees tucked under her chin, arms wrapped around her legs, Hope watched the man she loved move over the land like an intelligent wind.

With slow strides Rio quartered the mouth of the canyon. Several miles wide, jumbled at the center with debris from thousands of flash floods, the canyon mouth was more like the lip of an outwash plain than a true canyon. The soil was so coarse and stony that little grew there. Water coming down from the heights simply sank into the millions of spaces between the rocks and disappeared before the thirsty roots of plants could soak it up.

Hope watched Rio and remembered that her father had tried drilling a well in a canyon mouth similar to this one. He had drilled down hundreds of feet deeper than his deepest existing well before he gave up and admitted that there was no end to the dry, loose, rocky soil.

That was when he had decided to drill where her namesake well was now. He had struck groundwater and had prayed that his water worries were over.

It hadn't turned out that way.

With a weary gesture Hope readjusted her hat to shade her eyes against the changing angle of the sun. Thinking about her father scraped at her emotions, yet

every time she thought of water she couldn't help thinking of him.

She loved the land.

She had loved her father.

And the land she loved had killed him. He had worked himself to death trying to get around the stony reality of a retreating water table. It was as though he believed if he just worked hard enough, long enough, faithfully enough, water would return to the land.

With each summer's visit to the ranch, Hope had seen her father grow older, more tired, more unbending in his determination to make the ranch become what it once had been—alive.

Within a year of her eighteenth birthday he had a stroke, followed by pneumonia. Hope, her mother, and her sister had visited him in the small hospital, sitting beside his bed, listening to him fight for breath. At least Hope and her mother had sat and listened; Julie had been terrified of the broken, white-haired old man who had taken the place of the strong father of her memories.

His death had increased Julie's terror and her mother's hatred of the land. Only the fact that her father had willed his half of the ranch to Hope kept her mother from selling it.

Instead, her mother had abandoned the Valley of the Sun, leaving Mason to live alone amid the wreckage of so many dreams.

Hope had come back as often as she could, but the demands of providing for her mother, her sister, herself, and the ranch had meant long hours of modeling.

Rarely could she afford to leave Los Angeles to come home to the land she missed with an intensity that would have shocked the people she worked with, people who thought she was cold because she didn't share their zest for weekend romances and frequent lovers.

Before Hope was twenty her mother had died. According to the accident report, she lost control of her car and crashed into a cement freeway overpass.

Hope knew the explanation wasn't that neat, that easy. Her mother hadn't wanted to live. Even Julie's iridescent smile and feverish pursuit of the perfect lover hadn't been able to sink through her mother's grief for her dead husband.

In the end only Hope's silent, enduring love of the land had touched her mother. She left the ranch to Hope, asking only that Julie receive half of the profits.

There hadn't been any profits. Not during the two years that it took for Julie to kill herself with drugs and despair, not in the four years since then. The only money that came to the Valley of the Sun came by way of Los Angeles and the Sharon Morningstar Modeling Agency.

Hope had lived in L.A. until she couldn't stand it any longer. Then she had packed up and returned to the land she loved more than anything else. She had told herself that she had saved enough money to do everything—meet daily ranch expenses, pay off back taxes, and even drill a new well if it came to that.

She hadn't thought it would. There had been dry years before. They had always passed before all the wells failed. It would be the same this time.

It hadn't been the same.

In January of this year she had been forced to take out a second mortgage at high interest rates. She had told herself that it would be all right, that once she found a good well, the second mortgage could be renegotiated on the basis of the ranch's greatly increased production.

But she hadn't found a well. She had spent thousands of dollars on surveys and geologists. They had told her there wasn't any water to be found on the Valley of the Sun.

She hadn't believed them.

She couldn't. It would be the end of her dream.

Stiffly Hope shifted on the unyielding surface of her rock and wondered how long she had sat there, thinking of a past she couldn't change and a future she couldn't control. She was all but numb.

Gingerly she slid off the rock and stretched. Dusk flicked an ear in her direction, snorted softly, and returned to her three-legged doze. Aces had her head up, ears pricked forward, watching something. Hope turned to see what had caught the mare's interest.

After a moment she saw Rio walking along the southern edge of the canyon, where rock crumbled and rattled down the slopes onto the dry, furrowed land below. As she watched, he began yet another zigzag across the mile-wide canyon floor. Soon a small fold in the land hid him as he worked his way up the broad canyon.

Hope tightened the cinch on Aces, mounted, and grabbed Dusk's rein. She rode farther into the canyon,

passing Rio far enough away not to disturb him, and chose a piece of higher ground to wait on. Up here nothing would get in the way of watching him while he zigzagged slowly toward her, searching for water hidden deep beneath the dry surface of the land.

As morning blended seamlessly into afternoon, Hope shifted position many times, riding Aces and leading the patient Dusk on a slow retreat up the canyon. Rio followed silently, quartering the land with extraordinary patience.

The climbing sun brought first warmth, then a surprising autumn heat to the canyon floor. Drowsiness turned Hope's bones to sand. She found a wide, shallow bowl of land set apart from the canyon floor. Quickly she took out the obvious rocks, spread an old quilt, and fell asleep beneath the sun's golden caress.

She dreamed of Rio, a river flowing through the landscape of her love. She awoke to a kiss as sweet as spring water, as warm as sunlight.

"Wake up, my beautiful dreamer," Rio murmured against her lips.

"But the dream was so lovely."

"What was it?"

"It was you, Rio. You and a well and water flowing. All of life in a single dream."

Unable to speak, he held her face between his hands.

She watched as sunlight struck his eyes, turning them into blue-black gems. His eyelashes were thick, utterly black, like his hair burning darkly beneath the sun. She looked up at him and knew beyond any doubt that he had been right—she was a one-man woman,

and Rio was that man. Whether he was with her or thousands of miles away, she wouldn't change.

When he left he would take her love. While he was here she would take from him what he could give. And she would pray that part of what he gave her was his child.

He kissed her very gently, as though she was a dream he was afraid to awaken. Reluctantly he lifted his head.

"You're so beautiful to me," he said. "Even more beautiful than your name. Hope."

Sunlight brought out both the gold and the green in her hazel eyes, and the love.

He kissed her dark, soft lashes and then stood up swiftly, not trusting himself to touch her any longer. Since he had seen her asleep on the faded quilt, he had thought of nothing but the ecstasy that waited for him deep within her loving body.

"Lunchtime," he said huskily. He went to Aces, pulled the sandwiches and canteen from the saddlebags, and went back to Hope. "Ham or roast beef?" he asked.

"Yes," she said, stretching.

He hesitated, then smiled crookedly. "You *are* a dreamer if you think you get both sandwiches."

"Two?" she yelped. "You mean you only made two sandwiches?"

"Well, after all that breakfast . . ." He shrugged.

She looked at him in a silence that was broken by her rumbling stomach. He glanced sideways at her, chuckled, and put two sandwiches in front of her.

"No, you need it more than I do," she said hastily, trying to give the lunch back to him. "You're the one who's doing all the work."

He let her put the sandwiches in front of him. Then he pulled two more sandwiches from the lunch bag and waited. It didn't take two seconds. With an indignant sound she snatched back her sandwiches and ignored his laughter. Muttering about men who had been out in the sun too long, she bit into the yeasty bread.

Both of them ate quickly, sipping coffee from a shared canteen. In the end she could eat only half of what Rio had given to her. Smiling to himself, he wrapped up half of the remaining sandwich and put it back into the bag. He ate the other half.

Despite the coffee and the nap, Hope felt sleepy. She yawned and stretched.

"Bored?" he asked quietly.

Startled, she blinked. Bored? With Rio so close and the ranch she loved all around her? She shook her head. "Just content."

"Sure?"

"Have I missed something?" she asked, puzzled.

"It seems like every time you come with me, either I talk your ear off about geology or I don't say much at all about anything." He watched her intently. "I just thought you might be bored."

Speechless, she simply stared at him for a moment, thinking that he must be teasing her the way he had with the sandwiches. Then she realized that he was serious.

"Up at Piñon Camp," she said, "you shared your vi-

sions of this land with me. I saw miracles. Continents moved and range after range of mountains rose from beneath the sea. There was water everywhere, good water, lakes gleaming beneath the sky, forests growing tall and thick against the mountains, snowfields and glaciers blazing on the rocky heights."

She smiled helplessly, unable to explain what she was feeling. He was so silent, watching her. *Doesn't he believe me? Didn't he hear when I said I loved him?* Slowly, deliberately, she framed his tanned face with her hands.

"Rio, I've never been more excited and yet at peace with anyone or anything, not even the Valley of the Sun. Today I watched you move over the land, searching, *listening*." She hesitated, then continued softly, sadly: "You're like a . . . a brother to the wind. Belonging to nothing, seeing everything, knowing things about the land that no one else does."

The words struck Rio with the force of an explosion, shaking him. Somehow Hope knew the name that no one else had ever spoken aloud but his grandfather, and then only once, when he gave Rio his name during a ceremony conducted in a place few men had ever seen.

"You see too much," Rio said savagely.

He felt naked before the clarity of Hope's vision. He surged to his feet and strode away from her, farther up the narrowing canyon, shutting her out. Then he realized the unfairness of what he had done and struggled to control the emotions that were reducing him to reflex and impulse. His grandfather had always told him to *listen*, to hold himself utterly still and *listen* with

every bit of himself. In time, understanding would come.

So Rio stood motionless, *listening* as he never had before.

He heard only Hope's love for him in every word, every gesture, every look. There was nothing else, no desire to cage the wind, to break him like a wild horse, to change him into a man who would be more comfortable to love.

Like the wind itself, she asked nothing of him.

And like the land itself, she gave everything in return.

Tension flowed out of Rio, leaving him both at peace and alive in a way he had never known before. He turned and walked back toward Hope. With each step he sensed the warm fall of sunlight, the subtle murmuring of the wind, the power of his own body, and the gritty whisper of the land beneath his feet.

It was a hard land, an honest land, a miraculous land with a million million yesterdays and more tomorrows than a man could count, a land where rains came and sank into stone until strange rivers seeped through the fossil remains of ancient seas.

The years peeled away until he was thirteen again, light-headed from ceremonial fasting and shivering with cold. It hadn't mattered. Nothing had been real to him then but the presence of buried water like gentle electric shocks against the soles of his bare feet.

It was the same here, now.

Water within the stone, water's ghostly presence tingling up through him with each step until he stood

transfixed, not able to take another step. Incredible currents sang through him, making him want to throw back his head to the sky and shout, but he had no voice. He had only the certainty of ancient water running black and sweet and deep beneath his feet.

Hope had seen Rio turn and walk back toward her, had seen him slow, then stop. The absolute stillness of his body screamed that something was wrong.

"Rio!" she called, scrambling to her feet.

He didn't answer.

She ran across the canyon bottom toward him until she could see the expression on his face. She stopped as though she had run up against a cliff.

"Rio?" she asked softly.

His eyes opened. They were almost as black as the water buried deep beneath the earth.

She walked toward him, touched him, and trembled. It was as though the ground had shifted beneath her feet.

He saw her knees buckle and his arms swept out, pulling her close, supporting her. He kissed her while the land whispered its secrets to him, to her, water singing to both of them from deep within the earth.

Then he gave to her what he had given to no other person.

"My true name is Brother-to-the-wind."

Twenty-one



MASON SLAMMED THE truck door and held out his arms to Hope. "Honey, you should have called me sooner! I'd have come back right after Thanksgiving instead of sitting around on my dead end stuffing my face with leftovers."

Laughing, Hope ran down the front steps and hugged him, burying her face in his red flannel shirt. He smelled of wool and cold and the awful pipe he never smoked around her. She loved all of it, for it meant that he was here again, ready to laugh and tease and share the Valley of the Sun with her.

"I wanted you to have a real vacation," she said. "You haven't had one in years."

"But the well—"

"You came back in time to help me set up the rig," Rio interrupted. "I didn't really need you until now."

Mason looked over Hope's shoulder at the tall, dark man filling the doorway to the house. As Mason and Hope climbed up the steps, he gave Rio a sideways look.

"Heard in town you had some trouble with Turner," Mason muttered.

Hope stiffened, remembering the ugly look on Turner's face when he stalked her through her kitchen.

Gently Rio's hand stroked over her hair, reassuring her with his touch. Without thinking, she turned her head so that her lips brushed against his palm.

Mason saw the gesture, understood everything that hadn't been said, and frowned.

Deliberately Rio put his arm around Hope and drew her against his side. "Turner won't be back. He knows that Hope is my woman."

Mason's faded green eyes focused on Hope. "Honey?"

"Yes, I'm Rio's woman." She searched Mason's eyes, remembering what he had said about Rio. *Temporary man*. "Don't be angry."

"Angry? Shoot!" Grinning, Mason held out his hand to Rio. "Welcome home, son. It's about time you found a good woman and settled down. And God never made no better woman than Hope."

She started to protest, to explain that Rio hadn't meant that kind of belonging, home and children and forever.

Rio tilted her face up to his and kissed her lightly on the lips, stilling the protest he saw forming.

"I know," he said softly.

The words could have been an answer to Mason's praise of Hope or to her silent protest.

"This calls for a drink," Mason said happily.

He strode into the house and went directly to the old-fashioned walnut bar cabinet that stood at one end of the living room.

"None of that city bubbly, neither. Rye," Mason announced.

Hope and Rio smiled as the old man pulled a bottle out of the bar, opened it, and inhaled with appreciation. He pulled out three cut-crystal whiskey glasses, examined them critically for dust, and poured a splash of amber liquid into each. He handed out two glasses and held the third high.

"To the both of you," Mason said, his voice husky.

Hope touched her glass against Mason's, making crystal ring triumphantly. She turned to Rio—and the searching intensity of his look made her knees buckle as they had in Wind Canyon when she had sensed the certainty of water coursing through him. Through her. Her hand trembled, sending tiny shivers through the potent whiskey.

Rio's glass rang sweetly against hers, then against Mason's.

She wanted to reassure Rio that he didn't have to worry about her, that what had happened between them was her choice, her joy, her dream. But Mason was there, smiling like a man who had just stumbled onto the golden end of a rainbow. So she simply looked at Rio, telling him silently what she couldn't say in front of Mason.

Brother-to-the-wind, I love you. All of you. The easy and the difficult and everything in between.

Watching Rio over the brilliant crystal rim of her glass, she sipped the potent whiskey.

He watched her in turn, open to every shift of emotion across her face. The taste of rye swept across his tongue,

exploded in his mouth, but it wasn't nearly as potent as the love he saw in Hope's eyes. He touched his glass to hers again. Then he bent and kissed her slowly, *listening* to her as though she was an unknown country whose secrets he was only beginning to explore.

"Guess I better dust off my go-to-town suit," Mason said smugly. "How much time I got?"

Hope smiled up at him from within the curve of Rio's arm. "For what?" she asked.

"To git geared up for your wedding." His tone of voice said that he thought she had better sense than to ask such a silly question.

"There's no rush." Hope's voice was calm and very final, an unmistakable verbal NO TRESPASSING sign.

Mason had considered himself Hope's honorary father for too long to pay any attention to the warning. His heavy gray eyebrows levered up almost to his hairline.

"What are you talking about, gal? I want my grandkids born proper!"

Hope felt Rio's tension in the sudden hardness of his arm around her shoulders.

"Mason," he said in a soft, inflexible voice, "leave it alone."

For a moment there was an electric tension in the room. The old man's mouth opened, then closed hard and tight. The narrowing of Rio's dark eyes and the flat line of his mouth were as much a warning as his voice had been. Only a foolish man would ignore the signals of Rio's anger, and Mason's mama hadn't raised any fools.

The old man looked at Hope with swift concern. Being Rio's woman was not the same as being Rio's future wife. The shadows in her beautiful eyes told him that she knew it, and had accepted it.

Anger surged through Mason, shaking him. *She's giving herself to a man that don't appreciate her.*

On the heels of rage came a tumble of confused thoughts. Mason shook his head as though to settle his mind.

It don't make sense. Rio ain't no drunken buck that can't keep his pants zipped. Rio wouldn't touch a woman like Hope unless he cared about her in a permanent sort of way.

He just don't know it yet, that's all. He'll smarten up quick enough.

Mason sighed and hoped it would be soon.

Real soon.

"You be right careful of Hope," he said quietly, looking Rio straight in the eye. "That woman's worth more than you and me put together."

In silence Mason tossed back the rest of his rye, put the bottle away, and went out to the truck to bring in the supplies he had picked up in town.

"Don't be angry," she said quickly, softly, to Rio. "He's all the family I have."

Rio bit back on the emotions that had exploded when Mason turned on Hope: *I want my grandkids born proper.*

He wondered if Mason would feel better knowing that Hope had gone into the affair with her eyes wide open. There wouldn't be any children. No matter how

much she thought she loved him, she didn't want her children born not white.

"I'm not angry," Rio said.

And he wasn't. He understood. He had understood before he turned eleven.

Together Rio and Hope helped Mason carry in the sacks and boxes of food he had picked up in town. Without hampering Hope in any way, Rio made it clear that she wasn't to lift, drag, shove, or otherwise disturb the heavy burlap bags of potatoes and rice, flour and beans, sugar and dried apples, and all the boxes of canned goods.

Though she eyed the closed cartons, sacks of the drilling lubricant everyone called "mud," and bags of hardware that Rio had ordered for the drilling rig, she didn't touch anything. He was ignoring them as though they didn't exist. Mentally she shrugged and reached for a big sack of flour.

Rio beat her to it. He hefted the sack over one shoulder, gathered up a fifty-pound sack of potatoes with his other arm, and headed for the kitchen. She grabbed a bag of milk, butter, and cheese that was teetering on the edge of falling over and started after him. When she got back to the truck, she reached for a burlap bag of rice.

"I'll get it," he said, lifting the slithery weight of the rice bag to his shoulder. Then, when she reached for more potatoes, he added, "Mason's going to drop one of those grocery bags."

She looked up, saw that he was indeed close to losing a bag full of fresh vegetables, and snatched it from him.

The next time she reached for something heavy, Rio picked it up before she could, even though he already had one bulging sack riding on his shoulder.

"Rio," she said in a reasonable tone, "I've been playing tug-of-war with fifty- and hundred-pound bags of food since I was twelve."

"Bet you lost, too."

She smiled reluctantly. "Well, my style leaves something to be desired, but the job gets done just the same."

Rio shifted the heavy bags so that their weight was comfortably balanced on his shoulders. "Stand on tip-toe so I can kiss you."

As soon as Hope's lips brushed his, he said, "We have a deal, woman. You dream for me and I'll haul mountains into the pantry for you."

Mason cleared his throat loudly from the doorway. "You know, them that don't work don't eat."

Laughing, Rio stole another kiss from Hope.

Mason tried not to smile. Then he gave in and grinned as broadly as a kid. He had never seen Rio so open, so . . . free. And Hope, well, Hope looked like she had swallowed the sun.

Mason decided that he would stop worrying about wedding dates and Rio's wandering past and Hope's generous, vulnerable heart. A man would have to be stump-dumb and mule-stubborn to walk away from a woman like Hope. Rio was neither.

While Hope sorted out vegetables at the kitchen counter, she listened to the good-natured ribbing Mason was giving Rio over some incident from his past. Relief

swept through her, and a rushing gratitude. She had been afraid that Mason wouldn't accept the fact that she was Rio's woman, period. No rings, no ceremony, no until-death-do-us-part. Mason hadn't liked it, but he wasn't holding a grudge. He loved both Rio and Hope.

If she was lucky, she could give Mason one of his heart's desires. She could have a baby for him to fuss and worry over, a child who would call him grandpa and pester him with endless questions about the past.

If she was lucky.

She hadn't been lucky this month. After almost two weeks with Rio, her period had come with the regularity of the moon's own cycle. But December would be coming soon. It would be different then. It had to be. She wouldn't get many more chances.

When the well came in, Rio would leave.

She knew it as deeply as she knew that she wanted his child. Yet within her acceptance part of her cried: *Why does he have to leave? What can he find out there that he can't find on the Valley of the Sun?*

The questions had no answer, and no end to the asking. They were still quivering in her mind when Rio shut the bedroom door behind him that night and took her in his arms.

"I'm sorry, little dreamer," he said, stroking his hands down the line of her back.

For a moment she stiffened, wondering if he had read her mind and knew that she was crying in silence over the future when he would leave.

"Mason won't lean on you again," Rio said. "He understands how it is between us."

How can he? she asked silently. *I don't understand myself.* But all she said aloud was, "I'm glad. Maybe he can explain it to me."

"What?"

"You."

"What don't you understand?"

"Why you'll leave."

Before Rio could speak, Hope kissed him long and hard, filling herself with his taste.

"Never mind," she whispered against his lips. "It doesn't matter. Understanding why won't change anything, not really. I'll still love you and you'll still leave me."

"Hope, I—"

"Brother-to-the-wind," she said over his words. "Love me while you're here." Her hands moved over his arms, his shoulders, his chest, and she shook with sudden hunger for him. "Love me now."

His hands tangled in her dark hair, tilting her head back so that she had to meet his eyes. What he saw shook him to his soul: grief and acceptance, passion and love.

Most of all, love. She loved him as no one ever had, more than he had believed anyone could love.

"Hope," he said hoarsely, "I don't want to hurt you. Please, don't let me hurt you."

Her hands moved over his body, savoring the heat and power and arousal of him. She bit his lower lip with an exquisite sensuality she had learned from him.

"I'm hurting now," she said huskily. "I want you so much I'm shaking. Can't you feel it? I—"

The rest of her words were lost as his mouth came down on hers with a power that would have been painful if she hadn't wanted him so badly. She shivered as his salt-sweet taste filled her mouth. Her hands kneaded down his back to his waist and then his hips, loving the lithe, flexed strength of him. Wanting to feel the smooth heat of his skin beneath her palms, she slid her fingers inside the waistband of his jeans.

It wasn't enough.

He said something hot and dark as her fingers moved over his silver belt buckle, tugging on it. It didn't open. She made a broken sound of frustration and pulled harder. The buckle stayed closed.

"Damned stubborn thing," she muttered. "Reminds me of a certain water witch I know."

He laughed low in his throat and stepped back, peeling away his clothes until he stood naked before her.

"Is this what you want?" he asked. "Is this—"

His words broke off as she came to him, licking his lips with tiny strokes of her tongue, teasing him when he tried to capture her mouth. She moved against him, gently pushing him backward, inciting him with her sultry caresses and silky retreats.

When he felt the bed against his legs, he sank down, pulling her after him. She slipped from his arms as her hands and mouth moved over his face, his shoulders, his chest. The hot, wet caress of her tongue made him wild. Hungrily he tried to unbutton her blouse, but she slid away again.

"No," she murmured, biting his nipple with exquisite care. She sat up and her hands moved quickly, tak-

ing off her clothes, throwing them aside. "Let me dream you," she whispered, coming down beside him in a warm rush. "Let me. Dream."

At first Rio didn't understand. Then she began to move over him like sunrise, warming everything she touched. And like sunrise, she touched everything. The pleasure of her hands was a sweet violence. The pleasure of her mouth taking him was an ecstasy so great he couldn't breathe.

And still she dreamed him, creating him with each hot touch of her tongue, each shivering instant that she held him, dreaming and loving him equally, suspending both of them in a timeless sensuality that ended only when he looked at her dreaming him and knew that he had to share both the dreaming and the dream or he would die.

He reached for her, saying her name again and again, his voice as rough as his breathing.

Her only answer was the intimate glide of her tongue over his aching flesh, her murmur as she tasted his hot essence.

Suddenly the world spun and Hope found herself flattened beneath Rio's weight. Her smile became a blaze of sensual anticipation. His smile was narrow and taut. Her elegant legs rubbed caressingly against him in mute demand that he fill her until she overflowed.

But it was his turn to dream, and hers to be dreamed, and he wouldn't be denied one single instant of it. His hands and mouth moved over her like the wind, wrapping her in a sensual storm, taking her to the edge of

breaking and holding her there, shaking, holding himself there with her, dreaming with a consuming passion he had never known before.

When he finally sank into her, he drank her scream of pleasure with a deep kiss. They moved together as one, dream and dreamer, and neither knew who was dreamer or dream.

Hope fell asleep locked tightly in Rio's arms, her questions abandoned because the answers no longer mattered. She was the land and he was a rain-bearing wind. Against that truth, no question or retreat was possible.

She would stay, he would go, and love would be the empty sky stretched between them.

Twenty-two



“WAKE UP, DREAMER,” Rio said, nuzzling against the satin weight of Hope’s breast. “We’ve got a well to dig.”

Her eyes opened. The first pale radiance of dawn was filling the room. She smiled at the hard-faced man who lay naked beside her. Sighing, she eased her hands into his thick, collar-length hair, savoring the feel of it against her sensitive skin.

Deliberately he moved his head against her palms, increasing the pressure of her caress. The frank sensuality of his response sent visible shivers through her. Her breasts tightened and peaked, tempting him. She shifted her legs until they were tangled with his, asking for the gift of his body.

He kissed the dark rose tip of one breast and sank deeply into her, loving the feel of her sultry, welcoming heat. He moved slowly, slowly, nudging her from sleepiness into dreamlike arousal until she lifted and twisted

against him, but still he pushed her slowly, tenderly, irresistibly over the sensual edge. He savored his nakedness inside her, shared the shivering, tugging, pulsing of her ecstasy, and then he put his face against her neck and gave himself to her in a long, unraveling release that was like nothing he had ever known with a woman before.

For a time there was only silence and dawn and the warmth of their intimacy. Then Rio sighed and reluctantly separated himself from Hope.

"I'll wait in the shower for you," he said.

After a few lazy minutes of wishing that Rio was still in bed with her, Hope went down the hall still half-asleep, lured by the sound of running water. When she stepped into the bathroom, he leaned out of the bathtub shower and watched while she wrapped her hair in a towel. He kissed her nose, nibbled on her lips, and pulled her into the shower with him.

She yelped. The water had just barely begun to warm the pipes. "How can you stand it?" she asked through clenched teeth.

"Keeps me out of trouble."

She slanted him a remembering kind of look. "Are you calling me trouble?"

"Real quick this morning, aren't you?"

He gave her a kiss that made her forget the temperature of the water, handed her the soap, and got out of the shower before he started something they didn't have time or privacy to finish properly. Mason had just come in downstairs and was banging pots in a wordless warning of his presence.

Hope didn't linger even though the water was getting

hotter with each passing second. She knew how eager Mason was to get out to the well site. And so was she.

Today was the first day of December. More important, it was the first day of drilling.

Part of her was like a kid at Christmas, half-wild to unwrap the biggest present and end the suspense. The rest of her was adult. She wanted the well. She must have it for the Valley of the Sun to survive. But when the well was dug, Rio would leave.

She pushed the thought aside and soaped herself quickly. There was nothing she could do about the future except let it ruin the time she did have with him. She wasn't going to do that.

The smell of bacon and coffee drifted up the stairs to Hope. She pulled on clothes in a rush and went downstairs with the heedless speed of a child.

"Morning, Mason," she said when she got to the kitchen. "What's for breakfast?"

"What does your nose tell you?"

"That you've been sucking on that horrible pipe."

He snickered as though they hadn't said the same thing every morning for as long as he could remember.

Rio handed her a steaming cup of coffee that was as black as his hair. Automatically she went to the screened porch and looked out at the dawn sky.

Pure air, shimmering with light and color, absolutely empty of clouds. It was cold, too, the kind of dry cold that made the air shine like polished crystal.

"No rain," Mason said without looking up from the bacon. "This here drought is shaping up to be a real doozy." He dragged a few crisp strips of bacon onto a

paper plate to drain. "How are the troughs holding out?"

"Filled them yesterday," Rio said.

He snatched a piece of bacon as soon as Mason's back was turned. He took a big bite and fed the remaining half to Hope.

"Saw that," Mason said without heat. "May be old, but I ain't blind. You doing the eggs this morning, gal, or are you gonna eat whatever I take a notion to fry?"

Hastily she put down her cup of coffee and began cracking eggs into a pan. Very quickly everyone was sitting down to breakfast. As usual, silence reigned until the last bit of food was eaten.

While Mason and Rio loaded lengths of pipe and five-gallon cans of water and fuel into the pickup, Hope raced through the kitchen, setting up everything for dinner. The three of them climbed into the front seat of the truck and headed for Wind Canyon.

As soon as they turned off the main ranch road, the truck started shaking like a rough-gaited horse. The side road was nothing more than twin ruts that snaked over and around natural obstacles. It was better suited to horses than to vehicles, but as long as it didn't rain, the four-wheel-drive pickup was more efficient for hauling people and supplies than a horse and wagon.

Both excited and content, Hope sat quietly between the two men she loved. From time to time she watched Rio from under her eyelashes, admiring the strong masculine lines of his face and the midnight-blue clarity of his eyes.

He caught one of her looks, took his hand off the

wheel long enough to trace the line of her cheek with a gentle knuckle, and then concentrated on the rugged road again.

Mason smiled to himself. Rio had never been an outgoing and affectionate kind of man, yet he rarely had his hands off Hope for more than a few minutes. It wasn't just her female parts he was after, either. He touched her hair, her cheek, her hand, her arm. It was a man's way of saying without words that he liked being with a woman. And she sure liked being with him. It showed in her smile, her eyes watching him, her complete ease with a man that lots of folks were uncomfortable around.

In all, Mason was planning on a January wedding. February at the latest.

Blissfully unaware of Mason's thoughts, Hope leaned lightly against Rio and watched the land unfold. Wind Canyon looked different to her now. Instead of being a dry, nearly useless piece of the ranch's history, it was the leading edge of the Valley of the Sun's future. To Hope, in Wind Canyon the air was cleaner, the sun brighter, the sage more silver, and the mountains a beautiful, jumbled treasure house whose riddle her lover had solved.

Rio saw the excitement on Hope's face and wanted to warn her again that he couldn't guarantee a successful well.

There was water here, no doubt about it. Water that had fallen on the mountaintops and transformed limestone into a huge, unlikely sponge. Water that had sunk gradually into the limestone and moved through it at a

pace that made a glacier look like a racehorse. Water pulled by gravity and pushed by the increasing weight of each season's rain sinking down until the aquifer became a solid river under tremendous pressure, millions upon millions of acre-feet of pure cold liquid waiting to pour out once the waterproof stratum over it was broken by a drill bit.

Water that had flowed for a million years and would flow for a million years more.

Yes, the water was here. He could still remember its presence tingling up through his body. But how far down? And how much hard rock was between the limestone and the surface of the earth?

How much hard *luck* waited, too?

He knew very well the kinds of incidents that plagued drilling. Broken drill bits and tools dropped into the drilling hole. Injury caused by carelessness or exhaustion or both. Water discovered, but too little to do any good.

Then there was the weather. Wells, especially in the West, rarely came in convenient places. Wind Canyon was no different. Remote. Rough. Unforgiving. If it rained too much, it would be almost impossible to supply the drilling site. Then Rio would have to shut down until it dried out.

Hope didn't have enough money to carry the ranch through those kinds of delays.

At least rain didn't seem to be a problem for a while, but the rest of the hard-luck list couldn't be shrugged off. The only way to find out how far down the water lay was to drill until you hit it. If you ran out of time,

money, luck, or guts before you brought in a well, you had your answer—the water was too damned far down.

It was the time factor that ate most deeply into Rio's confidence. He had worked as little as a week drilling a successful well and he had worked for months on hard-luck, hard-rock holes.

Though Hope hadn't said anything herself, Mason had quietly told Rio that the second mortgage was due January fifteenth. She insisted that she had the money to pay off the second mortgage and still keep the ranch alive, but Rio knew that Hope's resources were very limited.

He was haunted by the idea of her pouring everything she had into a useless hole in the ground, a hole he had chosen and encouraged her to dig.

Rio hoped that the aquifer was close to the surface, but every bit of his education and instinct told him that the water was down, way down, right at the breaking point of money, luck, and nerve.

The pickup bucked and slithered and crabbed up Wind Canyon's rocky bottom. Before Mason had come back from his sister-in-law's home, Rio had used the pickup's winch to pull out sage clumps, piñon, and juniper. In the end he had managed to hammer out a rough track that allowed the pickup truck to get up into the canyon. The track would turn to glue and quicksand with the first real rains, but there wasn't time or money to build a better road.

If Rio had to, he would camp out here and bring supplies in on horseback. He had slept in worse places in the past. He would sleep in worse places in the future.

When you were drilling wells, comfort wasn't on the list of necessary supplies.

He parked the pickup beside the stark angles of the old derrick he would use as a drilling tower. Small, battered, rusted, the derrick wasn't much to look at. But it was sturdy. He had used it at some god-awful sites, places where even a professional optimist would have laughed at the thought of water.

That ugly old derrick had brought in well after well.

The other drilling machinery he had to work with wasn't any more impressive than the derrick. He had built this rig from cannibalized parts of other rigs that had been tossed away and forgotten in Hope's barn, plus equipment he had scrounged in countless other barns during his travels around the West. The new pieces Hope had bought to make it all fit together stood out like dimes on a dirt floor, making everything else look even more shabby by comparison.

"Good thing this ain't no beauty contest," Mason said, climbing down out of the truck. "We'd lose sure as God made little green apples."

Rio's only answer was a grunt as he carried supplies out of the truck and over to the drill site.

Even though the three of them worked quickly, it seemed like forever to Hope before everything was in place and Rio was ready to start drilling. She all but danced with impatience when he started up the engine that would drive the drill. The sudden explosion of sound was shocking in the canyon's sunny silence.

When Rio saw Hope flinch at the racket, he went over to her and said loudly, "You get used to it after a while."

"Yes," she retorted. "It's called going deaf."

He laughed and his long arms reached out, lifting her up level with him. "Give me a kiss for luck and then go over to the board and throw the number-one switch."

Eyes sparkling with excitement, Hope wrapped her arms around Rio and gave him a kiss that made him ache to be alone with her. Everything about her called out to him—her sensual riches, her serene silences, her determination, her intelligence.

Hope felt the same way about Rio. She loved being close to him, talking with him, being silent with him. He was a river flowing through her, bringing life to everything he touched.

Slowly, hungrily, Rio let Hope slide down his body. Reluctantly he opened his arms and let go of her.

She took a broken breath, feeling almost disoriented. Then she shook herself and went to the board attached to the derrick. Lights, dials, switches, gauges, and a tangle of wires took the pulse and temperature of the drilling equipment. She located the number-one switch and looked over her shoulder at Rio.

He was standing braced, leather-gloved hands steadying the mechanism that controlled the alloy drill bit. He looked up at her and nodded.

Her hand swept down and power surged into the drill.

The bit turned rapidly, making an odd, high noise. Then it touched the ground, biting into it with a grating sound. The soil was alluvial, loose. It wasn't long before the drill vanished, pulling pipe after it.

Rio looked up from the drill, smiled quickly, and gave the board a swift, casual glance. He didn't really need to look at gauges and dials to know that everything was working properly. He went by the sound of the engine, the vibration of the drill, the feel of the equipment.

He knew that the first part of drilling would be the fastest, the easiest, and the most rewarding work right up until the instant water was struck. Other than the occasional huge boulder, the bit wouldn't have to chew through anything hefty until it reached an underlying layer of hard rock.

Out on the plains, bedrock could be thousands of feet down, buried under millions of years of debris from the highlands. But here, in the canyon, gravity and regular flash floods carried away much of the loose soil.

The well itself would be beyond the reach of those seasonal floods. Rio had begun drilling in a shallow bowl above the canyon floor. Forty extra feet of drilling was a small price to pay for a well that would survive the winter floods.

After an hour or two, Hope told herself that it was foolish for her to stand around and watch pipe disappear. She should go back to the ranch, get on Aces, and check on the range cattle that were depending on scarce natural water instead of the wells.

There was also Sweet Dreams, another of Sweet-heart's calves, to check on in particular. Hope thought she had seen a slight hesitation in the heifer's gait, but it had been too dark to be certain. After she looked over

Sweet Dreams, she had to wire up the hole a coyote had dug to get to the chickens. Then there were the bills to pay and the latest tax assessment to protest.

And the drill bits—she couldn't forget them. Some old ones had been sent off for sharpening. They were ready to be picked up in town. She also had to order two special hard-rock bits. The expense involved had shocked her, but she hadn't protested. If Rio needed titanium alloy drills with diamond-studded teeth to find her water, that was what he would get.

Uneasiness snaked through her as she remembered Rio's expression when he had asked for the special drill bits. He said that he might be able to get the job done with the bits he had, but it would take much too long. Though he hadn't said anything else, she wondered if he was already getting restless, if the wind was calling his name.

The thought made her ache, even though she had to admit that she didn't have a lot of time, either. Not when it came to the well. It was proving much more expensive to drill than she had expected. She had based her estimate on what it had cost to drill her namesake, and then had doubled it, adding a ten percent margin for error.

The margin hadn't been big enough. A lot had changed since her namesake well had been drilled more than a quarter of a century ago. A combination of inflation and more advanced technology had sent the cost of drilling a well soaring like a moon rocket.

Just buying the parts to make Rio's old equipment work had cost more than she had budgeted to buy an

entire secondhand rig. The endless bags of "mud" used to grease the drill hole cost nearly as much as an equal weight of grain. As for pipe—you would think from the price that pipe was made of some gem-studded space-age alloy rather than plain old steel.

Though Hope didn't say anything about it to Rio, in order to buy the new drill bits and the extra pipe he had ordered, she would have to dip into the money she had set aside to pay off the second mortgage. She had wanted to ask if he was sure, *really sure*, he would need all that pipe.

She hadn't said a word. If he thought it would be a deep well, she would take his word for it. She had felt water and certainty flowing through him as surely as sunlight through the desert.

"Hope? Hope! You gone deaf, gal?" Mason yelled.

She blinked, startled out of her thoughts. Mason had an oilcan in one hand and was poking at the equipment that ran the drill.

"I asked you three times," he said, "if you're gonna check on the water out at the west end of Silver Basin."

She put away her worries and answered him with a nod. Instantly he went back to nursing the noisy engine.

For a moment she wished she had something as useful to do at the drilling site rather than miles away. But all she could do for now was brood over what the invisible drill bit would find.

Or not find.

It was much too soon for that kind of fretting. The drill bit hadn't even ground down as far as the deepest

roots of the hardiest desert plants. If water was that close to the surface, she wouldn't be drilling a new well here or anywhere else on the Valley of the Sun.

"Need anything?" Hope asked loudly, catching Rio's eye.

To her surprise he nodded and gestured her over to him. Wondering what they could have forgotten at the ranch, she stepped up to the drilling area.

Rio took off his leather gloves, framed her face with his strong hands, and kissed her gently.

"You, Hope," he said against her hair, holding her close. "I need you."

Sudden tears burned in her eyes. She buried her face against his neck and hung on to him with all her strength.

"I'm here," she said fiercely. "I'll always be here for you."

She felt his arms tighten until she could hardly breathe.

"Watch that third turn on the way out," he said, when he finally released her. "The wheel will buck like a steer halfway through." Then, quickly, he added, "Be careful, my beautiful dreamer. Keep that snake gun loaded and handy."

Hope's eyes widened. "Do you think Turner will come back?"

"No." Rio's voice was flat, harsh. "If I thought he'd touch you again, ever, I'd take him up in the mountains and lose him. It's just that I . . ."

She waited, wanting him so much she ached.

He made a helpless, almost angry sound and kissed

her suddenly, searchingly. He lifted his head and looked at her with eyes the color and radiance of indigo twilight. "You're so damned precious to me. The thought of anything happening to you makes me want to grab you and hide you in the safest place on earth."

She smiled and brushed her lips over his. "I'm fine."

"I know. But . . ." He took her hand, peeled back her work glove, and saw again the bruise that he had noticed this morning, a mark no bigger than his fingertip. "Even a little thing like this." His lips and tongue gently touched the bruise. "I can't explain it. I don't even understand it. I just know that the thought of you being hurt makes me bleed."

She saw the intensity of his emotion in his eyes and felt it in the powerful, taut muscles beneath her hands. For the first time she had the tiniest stirring of hope that perhaps he wouldn't leave after the well was drilled.

The possibility quivered through her, making her tremble.

It was like the possibility of an artesian well, an endless upwelling of life itself transforming everything it touched. She and Rio could live on a renewed Valley of the Sun, raising cattle and children and loving each other until the last sun had set—and still the land would go on, the water would flow, and their children would sow their own crop of dreams and know the bittersweet joys of harvest.

Rio's breath caught at the emotion radiating from Hope. She had never been more beautiful to him, more alive, incandescent with love for him. The thought of

anything dimming that joy was a tearing agony deep in his soul.

Hope—my beautiful dreamer—don't let anything hurt you. Even me.

Especially me.

But he would hurt her, and he knew it as surely as he knew she loved him.

Twenty-three



THE DRILLING WENT SLOWLY.

Day by day, December slid toward Christmas. Day by day, one piece of equipment after another gave out, protesting its burden and the patchwork nature of the rig. The delays lasted from a few minutes to much longer, depending on how soon a replacement part could be brought in.

When the bit finally reached hard rock, the pace of the drilling slowed to inches, then to fractions of inches. The special, and very expensive, bits Rio used could have gone faster, but not when they were driven by an old, cranky engine that couldn't go for long hours at high output.

The layer of rock the drill hit was thick and unyielding. The rock didn't hold water. There was no place within the dense crystalline stone for liquid to hide. Everything soft had been cooked out when the rock was deep within the earth's mantle, where the heat and

pressure were so great that solid rock strata melted and bent like great layers of wax.

If there was water to be found, it was farther down, beyond the dry, dense layer of stone.

Rio changed bits, drilled, changed bits again, and drilled again. The relentless work and hammering noise were numbing. Progress slowed to tiny inches that were measured in frustration and increasing incidents of mechanical breakdown.

At the end of each day, Hope no longer asked how the work was coming. The lines on Rio's face, and on Mason's, told her more than she wanted to know. She drove the men to Wind Canyon at dawn, picked them up at dark, and ran the ranch in between.

The rains still weren't heavy enough to free the cattle from depending on the troughs. She hauled water from the Turner ranch. Although Turner hadn't turned up again, she kept the rifle loaded.

Even before the first week of drilling passed, people from town and from Turner's ranch had started showing up at the Gardener ranch house. They always had an excuse—a saddle to sell or to buy, a mare to be bred, invitations to Christmas barbecues. Invariably the conversation circled around to what was really on the visitor's mind.

How's the well doing, Hope? Strike anything promising yet?

Hell of a place to drill, clear up in a canyon. Everybody knows that water goes down, not up.

You lookin' for artesian water? Ain't never heard of no artesian well around here, and my granny was born just the other side of your ranch.

Don't envy you none. Drilling wells is expensive as hell these days, and the price of beef just ain't worth mentioning.

Those were the most tactful people. The others, including a few of Turner's men, began looking at Hope like she had put a FOR RENT sign around her neck when she became Rio's lover. None of the men said or did anything out of line, because none of them wanted the kind of grief Rio would give them. But they looked at Hope with a lecherous speculation that made her quietly furious.

Hear Mason went up to Salt Lake for Thanksgiving. Musta been lonely for you, huh? Oh, yeah, Rio was there, wasn't he?

Gotta hand it to him. That drifter has a good eye for how the land lays.

Hear he tried to buy a ranch around here a time back. Didn't have no money, though. Bet your little ranch looks real good to him.

Hope ignored the men's insinuations and sideways looks, staring them coolly in the eye until they shifted uneasily and allowed as how it was time for them to be getting back to town or to Turner's ranch or to whatever rock they had crawled out from under.

She turned down all holiday invitations. She didn't have the time or the energy for parties. There was nothing in her life but cattle, drilling, and Rio.

Hope bumped along the last hundred yards of road and shut off the truck's engine. The derrick looked like a

child's toy against the soaring walls of the Wind Canyon.

"Good timing," Rio said as Hope got out of the truck.

"Why? Did you run out of coffee?"

He grinned. "Nope. We finally broke through the hard rock. I took a core sample of what was below. I was just getting ready to look at it."

Is there water?

But Hope didn't say it out loud. She didn't want to add to the pressure that showed in the tight lines around Rio's mouth. So she waited in hungry silence while he opened the special pipe that held the core sample.

A single look at his face told her everything she needed to know.

"Dry," he said neutrally. "Dry as the rock above it. No aquifer at this depth. But the stratum is softer than the one I just went through. The drilling will go faster now."

And it did. Days flew by as expensive pipe and lubricant vanished down the hole in the earth as though there was no end short of China.

Rio didn't say anything about the cores he took from time to time, or the changing layers of rock. With Mason at his side, he simply drilled and kept on drilling down through compacted soils older than man, layers of stone that had been laid down long before true mammals walked the earth, drilling down and down and down, pouring money and dreams into the dry land and getting nothing back but dulled or broken drill bits and blistered hands.

* * *

"Damn slippery damned coffeepot!" Mason growled.

Hope said, steadying the pot before it dropped, "Must be time to scour the grease off it again."

But she knew that the problem wasn't the pot. It was Mason's hands. He had used them too hard, for too many hours, working alongside Rio for twelve and fourteen hours a day.

A sideways glance told Hope that Rio knew what was wrong. Mason's hands wouldn't heal until he rested them, but he was too proud and too stubborn to admit it. His pain showed in the deeply cut lines of his face and the dark circles beneath his eyes.

"I have to go into town this morning," she said casually. "Mason, I want you to stay at the house. There have been too many people coming through here lately, and some of them I've never seen before." She turned to Rio. "You can get along without him for a day, can't you?"

"I'll manage." He had just the right mixture of reluctance and acceptance in his voice to ease Mason's pride.

She thanked Rio with her eyes.

"Do you need anything up at the well?" she asked Rio, ignoring Mason's mutterings that he didn't want to "baby-sit no damn house" when there was real work to be done.

Reluctantly Rio reached into his pocket. He avoided drawing on Hope's reserves of cash until he absolutely had to. But it was time.

"We barely have enough pipe and mud left to cover the normal lead time in ordering," he said. "There's only one hard-rock bit that's still sharp for when we hit another solid stratum. The other bits are in the pickup."

Trying not to show any emotion, she nodded and took the list. She had already dipped into the money that had been earmarked for paying the balloon on the second mortgage. Now she would have to take even more out of the special money market account.

She had known it was coming. That was why she was going to town today. She had an appointment with the bank. She was determined to renegotiate the second mortgage for another year. Or six months. Or two months.

Even one.

She had to buy enough time for Rio to drill down to the artesian water that lay beneath the dry land, waiting for the silver moment of release. She knew the water was there. She knew that he wanted to find it with the same intensity she did. Maybe even more.

He called himself a man without dreams, yet she knew that this well was Rio's dream in everything but name.

No matter how many people had told Hope it was impossible, she hadn't flinched away from her own dream of living on the Valley of the Sun. She wouldn't flinch in the face of Rio's dream, his need. She would give him all the time she had, all the pipe she could buy, all the drill bits, all of it, and never regret anything but that she had so little to give.

"Aren't you even going to ask me how close we are to water?" he said, watching her with shadowed blue-black eyes.

"Do you know?"

"No."

"Then," she said with a gentle smile, "there's no point in asking, is there?"

He caught her hand, rubbed his cheek against her palm, kissed it in silent thanks. "After weeks of drilling and nothing to show but dry rock, most people would be all over me like a bad smell."

"Most people don't have enough sense to come in out of the rain," she retorted.

"Dreamer." His voice was husky. He kissed her palm again, lingering. "My beautiful dreamer."

The warmth of that moment stayed with Hope all through the long drive to town. She ordered the drilling supplies first, paying a hefty charge for a rush delivery. Then she went to the small brick building that had a freshly painted sign out front: COTTONWOOD SAVINGS AND TRUST.

William Worth, the loan officer, was expecting her. He had been expecting her since loan payment checks had started coming through her money market account, eating into the funds that he knew she had reserved for the balloon payment on the second mortgage.

Worth was a patient man. He let her go through her entire speech with barely a frown to wrinkle the loose skin of his forehead.

Then he said no.

"But I'm digging a well," Hope said as though she hadn't mentioned it before.

"Ms. Gardener, excuse me for speaking so bluntly, but you're basing your request for a loan extension on a fool's dream. Your well is being dug in a godforsaken dry canyon by a half-breed troublemaker who has nothing to his name but a five-year-old pickup truck and a fine Arab mare he claims he caught running loose."

Hope bit back hot words.

The telephone on Worth's small, fake-wood desk started ringing, interrupting his prepared speech.

"The only way the bank could grant an extension," he said, reaching for the phone, "would be if you found a cosigner for the note."

Before she could say anything, he picked up the telephone, listened, and said, "Yes, sir." He replaced the phone, stood, and went to the office door. "I have to leave for a few minutes. I'm sorry we couldn't help you. Please keep the cosigner possibility in mind."

The door closed behind Worth with a distinct, final sound.

Hope felt as though an icy northern wind had blown over her, sapping her strength. The refusal hadn't been unexpected, but it was rock-solid. There was nothing in Worth's manner that gave her any grounds for thinking that he might change his mind in the few weeks between now and the day that the note was due.

For a moment she simply sat and gathered herself for the long drive back to the ranch. As she reached for her purse, she heard the door opening and closing behind her. She turned, expecting to see the loan officer again.

What she saw was John Turner.

"Now, what kind of look is that for the man who's going to save your ranch?" he asked, smiling thinly. "We're going to make a deal, you and me. I co-sign that note and you come to heel when I snap my fingers. No more giving away to drifters what I'm paying good money for. You cross your expensive legs and you cross them tight or I'll beat the living hell out of you."

His words buzzed around Hope like flies, noisy and meaningless.

Turner pulled a sheaf of papers out of his hip pocket and tossed them down in front of her. "Take your choice, baby doll. Me and your ranch or nothing at all. And don't kid yourself. Nothing is all you'll have. That blankethad won't hang around once we foreclose on the Valley of the Sun."

All the pressures Hope had been under bit into her with steel talons. All the disappointments, the fears, the endless quest for water, the knowledge that Rio would leave when water was found—everything. Rage swept through her, burning away the despair she felt, replacing it with a firestorm of adrenaline. She shot to her feet and looked at Turner through narrowed, glittering eyes.

"Go to hell." Her voice was soft, low, vibrating with anger.

He laughed. "Don't be a sore loser."

He walked toward her, stopping just short of her, so close that he could smell the subtle perfume she used. So close that when he reached inside his jacket pocket for a pen, the back of his arm almost brushed over her breasts.

"What kind of flowers do you want?" she asked coldly.

"Flowers?" He frowned. "What are you talking about?"

"Your funeral."

He flushed with anger and the memory of how easily Rio had brought him down. "I haven't laid a finger on you, and if you tell Rio any different, you're lying."

"You won't have to wait for Rio to catch up with you," she said, her voice brittle with contempt. "I'm not your victim to bully or to crawl all over in your bathroom fantasies. If you touch me, I'll come after you myself. And I won't use a kitchen knife this time. I'll use my father's shotgun."

For a moment there was only silence and the thick sound of air being drawn into Turner's lungs through nostrils pinched by rage. His lips twisted into a cruel smile.

"I'll see you the morning after the loan comes due. Mark it on your calendar, baby doll. January sixteenth, at your ranch house, and the sheriff will be right with me. That's the day you'll beg to suck my cock. I'm going to enjoy hearing every word of it."

"It won't happen. I'm not like the other women you've hounded and bought and bullied into bed. I'm not like the men you've dangled money in front of and leaned on until it was easier for them to sell you their stock or real estate or mistress than it was to make you angry by continuing to say no."

"Like I said, baby doll. I get what I want."

"Have you ever wanted something that didn't be-

long to someone else? Ever? Even once in your spoiled life?"

Turner's only answer was the red flush crawling up his face.

"That's what I thought," she said coolly. "You're still a baby. You're buried in toys, but the only one you want is the one you see someone else holding. You're obsessed with what you don't have. Until you get it. Then you drop the new toy and look around to see what other people are playing with. You've never grown up."

"Listen, you—"

"But that's your problem," she said, ignoring his attempt to talk over her. "It's not mine. Not anymore. No matter what happens with the ranch, with Rio, with anything at all, *I will never be your whore.*"

With an ugly sound, Turner spun around and slammed out of the room. As much as he wanted to put his hands on her, there were too many witnesses in the bank.

And there was Rio.

Always.

Slowly the adrenaline seeped out of Hope, leaving her face pale and her muscles like sand. When her hands no longer trembled she picked up her purse and let herself out of the small office. Other than a few curious stares from tellers who knew her, no one seemed interested in what had happened in the tiny office.

A few miles out of town, she took a detour to a small house where a silversmith lived. There she picked up the presents she had had made for Mason

and Rio. She couldn't believe that Christmas was only a few days away.

She had never felt less like celebrating. There was too much to be done. Some of it was bitter and hard.

Yet it had to be done just the same.

"How was town?" Mason called from the porch.

Though Hope hadn't said anything, he suspected that she had gone to ask for an extension on the second mortgage.

"Same as always."

He heard the anger and weariness beneath her carefully neutral tone and sighed. "I'll unload them supplies and go pick up Rio. You go talk to your black cows. They been mooing up a storm for you."

Hope turned the truck over to Mason and went to the home pasture to check on her Angus. Sweetheart came walking over, radiating muscular health with every stride. Her eyes were clear and deep, like pools of liquid darkness shining out from the midnight sea of her winter-thickened coat.

"Sweetheart, you're so beautiful you make me feel like a burlap bag," she said.

Sweetheart sighed as though to say, *Of course I'm beautiful. I'm perfect.*

Hope rubbed the cow lovingly, gave her a pan of grain, then shook the feed sack until the other Angus started ambling over. Quickly she poured out a long, thin line of grain. As the black cattle lined up for their

treat, she watched their movements critically. None of them appeared lame now.

For a few moments she simply stood and looked at her cattle. They had a solid, earthy reality that renewed her belief in her dream of a thriving ranch. Without realizing it, she smiled, feeling better just for being with her healthy, handsome herd.

She was seeing more than beautiful animals when she looked at her Angus. She was seeing the future of the Valley of the Sun.

"Good night, Sweetheart," she whispered. "And you, too, Sweet Dreams. Grow big and strong and gorgeous, just like your mom."

When Mason and Rio drove into the yard, there was just enough time for Rio to shower before dinner. With steps that he felt in every bone in his body, Rio dragged himself up the stairs and let steaming water pour over him, washing away the dust and grit of another dry day.

But nothing could wash away the bitter taste in his mouth.

He pulled on clean clothes and went downstairs. The thought of Hope's smile was as much a lure as the cooking scents that had his stomach growling impatiently.

"Come and get it or I'll feed it to the pigs," Hope said cheerfully when she heard Rio's footsteps on the stairs.

It was her standard greeting at the end of the day.

Usually he responded by grabbing her and kissing her soundly. This time he simply wrapped his arms around her, lowered his cheek to her hair, and held her as though she needed comfort.

Or he did.

"Long day?" she asked softly.

His arms tightened around her.

"Hit more stone," he said at last. "Finally got through it." Then, "It's dry on the other side, too."

Cold spread through Hope. She put her lips against his neck and counted the beats of his heart for a long, silent moment. Then she stirred and smiled up at him.

"Come on," she said. "You'll feel better after you eat."

Gently Rio moved his thumbs over her cheekbones and lips. He started to speak, but instead kissed her with a tenderness that brought a sheen of tears to her eyes.

"There is no one like you," he said simply.

That night Rio told her again, differently, wordlessly, taking her and being taken in turn, giving himself to the endless passion and shattering release that only Hope had ever called from him. He no longer questioned the urgent upwelling of her need and his own, the hot perfection of their fused bodies, the sense of rightness he felt all the way to his soul when he held her asleep in his arms.

There were times when he wished that he could drill for water in Wind Canyon forever, finding nothing but the unbelievable joys of this one woman's love.

Yet Rio knew he must find water, ending this dream and beginning another, Hope's dream of a Valley of the Sun that lived again. He had to find water, and find it

soon. The longer he stayed, the more he would hurt her when he left.

And the thought of hurting her was like hot metal drilling through his flesh and bone to his soul.

"I'm going to start drilling around-the-clock," Rio told Hope the next morning. "We're running out of time. The well has to be in by January fifteenth. Otherwise you'll never get the bank to extend your loan."

The darkness in his eyes was more than she could bear.

"No," she said calmly. "I can pay off the second mortgage. There's no need for you to kill yourself working double and triple shifts. We have as much time as you need."

Rio gave her a look that shook Hope to her soul, as though he sensed that she was talking about more than the well being drilled through layers of rock and time into an undiscovered past and an even more mysterious future.

"One of Mason's grandnephews is coming in after Christmas," Rio said. "I'll start around-the-clock drilling then."

She wanted to argue but didn't. He was right. Whether it was time or money or both, it didn't matter.

They didn't have enough of either.

Twenty-four



HOPE, RIO, AND MASON spent Christmas Eve out at the well site. She decorated the derrick with colored lights and piñon boughs, hung popcorn and cranberry strings over nearby sagebrush, and cooked turkey over a spit that Rio and Mason had rigged. They sang all the old carols, Hope's true alto mixing with Rio's bass while Mason played a scarred harmonica with surprising skill.

Tears ran down both Hope's and Mason's cheeks as the music brought back people and Christmases past, Hope's parents and Mason's beloved wife, memories of laughter and holiday surprises.

When there were no more carols to sing, they toasted Christmas and the well and one another with cut-crystal glasses of rye that caught and multiplied every colorful light Hope had strung from the derrick. For a time they sipped potent whiskey, savoring the silence and the wind and the special peace that came with the season.

Finally Mason stood, stretched, and went to the truck. He returned quickly, carrying two presents.

"Here you go," he said to Rio.

Surprised, Rio took the package and slowly pulled off the wrapping that Mason had taped until there was almost no paper showing. When Rio finally managed to open the long, flat box, he made a sound of amusement and pleasure.

A handmade snakeskin hatband gleamed up at him from the box, reflecting firelight from the pale, diamond-patterned scales. The size of the scales told him that the rattlesnake had been a big one.

"Don't I recognize this hide?" he asked wryly.

"Sure do," Mason said with satisfaction. "That's a chunk of the big son that thought he could live near Hope's Angus herd. I showed him otherwise."

"He's a beauty," Rio said, running his fingertips down the supple hatband.

"He'll look a damn sight better on your head than he did under the rocks by the trough."

Rio laughed.

Grinning, Mason gave Hope another package. She opened it and found a strip of the foolish snake made into a belt.

"Same for you, gal," Mason said, smiling. "The snake will look right pretty wrapped around your waist."

"Thank you," she said huskily. "I wondered what you were doing in the barn workshop all those early mornings. Now I know."

The thought of how the cold must have bitten into

his hands as he worked on the gifts made her want to smile and cry at the same time. She settled for giving him a big hug and a kiss on his scratchy cheek.

"This isn't as fancy as rattlesnake," Rio warned, handing a soft package to Mason.

Eager as a kid, Mason tore into the wrapping and found a new pair of leather work gloves. He pulled them on and admired them. They were tough and yet flexible enough not to bind knuckles that were swollen and sore from arthritis.

While Mason thanked Rio, Hope went to the box of kitchen supplies that she had brought up from the ranch for dinner. Inside, buried beneath the potato sack, she had hidden two small presents. She gave Mason his package first.

He opened the little box and his breath went out with a whoosh. "Damn, honey, I can't say when I seen something so pretty."

Gently he lifted out the silver buckle. It was a hammered oval with a running horse made of mother-of-pearl painstakingly inlaid in the center. He held the buckle in his gloved, gnarled hands, admiring the play of firelight across the silver and pearl surface.

"Can't wait to put it on," he said, winking at her.

He walked quickly over to the bright work light in the shed on the far side of the derrick, pulled off his belt, and began replacing his old brass buckle with the new silver.

While he worked, Hope handed Rio his present. He looked at her for a long moment, holding the small package in his hands before he began unwrapping it.

Inside the box, nested within layers of tissue paper, lay a heavy bracelet made of a single piece of cast silver. There was just enough of a gap in the oval form to allow it to fit over a man's wrist.

Rio whistled softly.

The curved surface of the bracelet was inlaid with pieces of polished turquoise in a rippling wave pattern that was a common Native American symbol for Rio's name.

The cool perfection of the silver caressed his fingertips. Then he felt an irregularity on the inner side and tilted the bracelet so that he could see the hidden surface. Inscribed on the thick silver were the words: *For as long as the water flows.*

Emotion wrenched through him, pleasure and pain at once.

With a smooth twist of his right hand, he fitted the bracelet on his left arm. The silver glowed against his dark skin. The wavy lines of the river symbol seemed to flow with each shift of wind and firelight.

When Rio looked at Hope, light and emotion gleamed in his eyes. He couldn't remember the last time that someone had given him a present, much less one that was so perfectly suited to him. He eased her down into his lap and kissed her gently, repeatedly, as though he was afraid that she would slide through his fingers like the wind if he tried to hold her too tightly.

"Thank you," he said almost roughly. "It's like you. Unexpected. Beautiful." He opened his collar and reached inside his shirt. "There's no fancy wrapping on

your gift. I wanted to give it to you the same way I got it long ago, warm with the giver's own life."

She watched as he lifted a Southwest Indian necklace from around his neck.

"This was my great-grandmother's, my grandmother's, and my mother's," he said quietly. "Mother gave it to me when she left me with my grandfather and went back to the city."

The necklace shimmering in Rio's hands was in a traditional squash-blossom pattern, but instead of hammered-silver crescents and turquoise stones, the blossoms were made from dimes more than a century old. It was a compelling blend of white and Indian cultures. Its stately beauty and history made chills move over her skin.

"Rio, I can't take—"

He kissed her until she forgot what she had been trying to say. While he kissed her, his fingers unbuttoned her blouse until his hands could circle her neck freely.

She felt the smooth, oddly reassuring weight of the necklace against her breasts. The silver was like a caress, radiating back the heat it had absorbed from his body.

Helplessly she whispered his name.

He kissed her again. Then he lifted his head and looked at her with eyes darker than the night, deeper.

"My grandmother told me that one day I would find the right woman to wear this necklace," he said. "I never believed her until I saw you by Turner's well with laughter in your eyes and water running like liquid silver from your cupped hands."

Hope blinked against the tears that burned her eyelids.

"Maybe, someday," he said, brushing his lips over hers, "your daughter will wear this necklace and you'll tell her about the man who gave it to you. I can't think of any better gift than that this silver be warmed by a child born of your body."

"What about your children?" she asked, her throat aching.

His gentle smile was like a knife turning in Hope.

It was just as painful for him.

"Once, I wanted a woman to have my baby. It was in the city, before I accepted that I was what my grandfather had named me. Brother-to-the-wind. The woman loved me, but she was pure white. She didn't want to have mixed children."

"Then she didn't love you," Hope said starkly.

He shook his head. "No, dreamer. She was just being honest. I've always been grateful to her for that. Another kind of woman wouldn't have told me until we were married. It happened to one of my cousins."

"I'm not like that," Hope said, her voice shaking. "I want—"

But Rio was still speaking, refusing to hear her, and his words were talons sinking deeply into her, making her soul bleed. "I'll never again ask a woman to bear my child."

Hearing Rio's lifetime of isolation summarized in his gentle, relentless words almost destroyed Hope. She tried to speak, to tell him that she would have

given even the Valley of the Sun if she could have his love and his children. But she couldn't speak. Words and emotions clogged her throat, defeating her.

"Rio, I—"

"Let it go, dreamer," he said against her lips. "My beautiful dreamer. Accept it. I have."

Head bowed, she fought the tears that were choking her.

And she wondered if she might be carrying Rio's baby now, if after he was gone she would one day give a warm silver necklace to a child he had never known.

The wind keened down the canyon, covering the small sounds Hope made as she struggled for self-control. Rio's hand moved slowly, repeatedly, over her hair, and with each motion the silver band on his wrist shimmered with unearthly light. Yet even more brilliant than hammered silver were the cascading stars and the glittering, ghostly river of the Milky Way overhead.

Mason returned to the campfire proudly wearing his new buckle. If he saw the gleam of tears on Hope's face, he didn't mention it. He just joined the intimate silence by the fire until only embers remained.

Coyotes began singing their own carols. Ancient harmonies shivered through the darkness with an eerie beauty that made it easy to believe in spirits and gods walking across the face of the night.

"My Zuni grandfather loved Christmas," Rio said quietly.

Hope turned her head against his shoulder and looked at his profile outlined by stars.

"He told me Christmas was the only time that the

white-eyes gathered in family clans and sang the songs of power with their souls in their voices. He said he could feel the Great Spirit flowing through the churches like a rain-bearing wind, sweeping away the dust of the previous year."

"Then why didn't he become a Christian?" Hope asked softly.

"He did."

"I thought he was a shaman."

"He was."

She looked over her shoulder at Rio. Smiling, he pulled her even closer between his knees, brushed his lips over her sage-scented hair, and tried to explain.

"My grandfather knew there were other gods, but he was convinced that the white man's God was stronger. For my ancestors, the proof of power was in day-to-day living. His children spoke a European language, learned European history, and worshipped a European God. That was power."

Rio hesitated, then added softly, "But the coyotes still sing harmonies older than man, the rain still can be called from a cloudless sky, and the wind still is brother to a few men. For Grandfather, that, too, was power."

Soft laughter breathed into Hope's hair, Rio's laughter as he remembered.

"But he had a hell of a time convincing Grandmother that there were other spirits as valid as the Holy Ghost. She prayed for his half-heathen soul until the day she died."

Hope ran her hand caressingly over Rio's arm. She

lingered to feel the silver bracelet, already warm with his life. His hand closed over hers, holding her between silver and his palm.

"Is your grandfather still alive?" she asked.

"Yes." Rio brushed his lips over her hair. "He's part of the coyote's song and the long cry of the wind. He's a phrase from a white man's carol and a breath of the power pouring through a Christmas church. There was room in his soul for all of them. I like to think there's room for him now in all of them."

Mason's soft "amen" came from across the campfire.

The wind gusted, sending a shower of sparks upward in an incandescent spiral.

After a moment Mason stretched and stood up. "Well, I'm gonna take these old bones back to a soft bed."

— "I'll bring Hope to the ranch in a while," Rio said.

"Suit yourself. I'm too old to need baby-sitting."

Mason walked beyond the range of the campfire's wavering light and climbed stiffly into Hope's truck. The engine turned over, the headlights swept across the sky, and the tires grumbled over the makeshift road.

"What about you?" she asked when it was quiet again. "Aren't you going to stay at the house?"

"I brought up a bedroll and mattress earlier."

Turning, she slid her fingers beneath his denim jacket until she found the warm flesh between the snaps on his shirt. "Is it big enough for two?"

His whole body tightened at her touch, as though her fingers were molten silver instead of flesh. Without

a word he stood, pulling her with him, and led her to his bed behind a big clump of sage.

Then he made exquisite, consuming love to her. Like a passionate wind he whispered her beauty and her sensuality, sang of his own need to fill every hollow of her, and then he came to her and moved within her, telling her with his touch those secrets only the wind knew. Again and again he brought her to shivering completion, knowing her with an intimacy that was greater with each touch, each instant, each movement of his powerful body over hers.

When she wept his name in her ecstasy, he gave himself to her and to the silver rains he had called from the desert of his own need.

Long before dawn the drill was turning again, chewing down through solid rock, dragging a long steel straw behind, drilling down to the point where dreams came true or died.

Twenty-five



AS THE DAYS passed and Hope's money poured in an unending stream down the drilling hole, softer rock gave way to harder and then to softer again. When Rio took a core of the new layer and opened it, his heart leaped when he felt the gritty texture of the sandstone. It was damp, tantalizing with a whisper of water.

He went back to drilling with renewed energy. The layer of sandstone stayed damp but no more, as though the years had leached all except a shadow of water from the rock.

When he drilled through to a new layer, it was dry.

No matter how many times the engine broke down or how many cores came up dry, Rio said nothing, did nothing except work even harder. His eyes were black and his mouth was bracketed by grim lines of exhaustion and determination.

The teenager who had come from Salt Lake to help

him worked with the tireless strength of youth. Mason worked with the unflinching endurance of a man who knew his own limits and hadn't yet reached them.

Every afternoon Hope came to them, bringing supplies and a smile. Except once. One day she couldn't smile.

That was the day she watched men load up every last head of stock on the ranch except Storm Walker. She only kept the stallion because she had promised him to Rio as a sire. She had sold the remaining range cattle the first week of January. They had already been trucked off to new pastures, places where water wasn't more precious than diamonds.

Mason didn't know about any of the sales. Hope made sure of it. No trucks came or went from the ranch except during the long hours when Mason was at the drill site.

As for Rio finding out . . . Rio was always up in Wind Canyon, always working, always watching with eyes that got darker and grimmer with each day. When he tried to talk about the deadline for the second mortgage, Hope always said, *You worry about the well. I'll worry about the rest. That was the deal.*

Today she had done everything she could to keep her part of the deal.

The door to the expensive black cattle truck shut with a final sound. Inside the trailer, Sweetheart bawled uneasily. Sweet Midnight answered her.

McNally sighed and turned toward Hope. He was a big, ruddy-faced man dressed in jeans, scuffed cowboy boots, and a leather jacket that was worth three thou-

sand dollars. His pale blue eyes could be kind or wintry, depending on his mood. Right now he wanted to bawl like the fine Angus he had just bought back from Hope.

"You sure you won't think about it?" he pressed. "I could co-sign a note or—"

"No," she cut in swiftly. "But thank you." She managed half of a smile. "Don't look so grim. You're thrilled to get Sweetheart back and you know it."

"Hell," he muttered. "If it was anyone else but you, I'd be laughing like a coyote right now." He sighed and looked at the relentlessly empty sky. "Damnation. Dry as a ninety-year-old virgin." He smacked his hat against his hand. "Let me help, honey."

"You have." She waited until he looked at her. "You paid what my Angus herd was worth rather than what you thought you could get me to agree to because I was desperate. Thanks to you, I'll keep the ranch. Your integrity made the difference."

McNally started to say something but thought better of it. Instead, he tugged his expensive fawn-colored Stetson into place and signaled for his driver to get ready.

"If you change your mind," McNally began.

"I won't," she said quickly.

"Yeah, I can see that. *Hell*." He stared at the bleak sky for a long moment, then sighed again. "Well, it's a long drive back. Better be going."

"Good-bye," she said. "And thank you. I mean it."

"Hell, honey. I'm the one should be doing the thanking. You have the finest little herd I've ever seen. You

ever decide to take on a partner, put me at the top of your list. I could use someone with your eye for bloodlines and calves."

McNally stepped up into the big cab, ran down the passenger-side window, and called out as the truck moved away. "I transferred the money yesterday. You have any problems with your one-horse bank, let me know. I'll fix it real quick."

She managed a smile and a wave as the big black rig moved slowly out of her yard and down the road, leaving behind nothing but sun, dust, and the memory of what it had been like to look in the home pasture and see her beautiful black Angus.

Instead of going to the drilling site as had become her habit, Hope drove her truck to town. Worth was waiting for her at the bank. The expression on his face told her that he expected an unpleasant scene.

The bright pickup in the parking lot told her that Turner was somewhere nearby, waiting to buy the ranch at a bargain price. Waiting to hear her beg.

The second mortgage was due today.

"Good afternoon, Ms. Gardener," Worth said, closing the door to his office behind her. "I know this is difficult for you, but you're young yet. There's plenty of time to—"

"Writing a check isn't difficult," she interrupted coldly. "I've had lots of practice."

While he watched in disbelief, she sat down, pulled out her money-market checkbook, and wrote a draft that would pay off the second mortgage to the last penny.

Worth took it without a word. Then he went to his

computer and called up the amount in her money-market fund.

"Well, goodness," he said, staring at the screen. "How did you, uh, manage?"

"The money is there," she said. "That's all you and your bank have a right to know."

"Er, of course. I'll have one of the girls draw up the paperwork. It will take a few minutes. We weren't expecting this."

"I have other errands. I'll be back in an hour. The paperwork will be ready by then, correct?"

Worth blinked. Hope was wearing faded blue jeans, an equally faded pink work shirt, and boots that were dusty and scarred. Yet her crisp tone would have done credit to a duchess.

"Yes, of course. We'll be ready," he said.

With a curt nod, Hope left the bank and went to pay off the rest of her bills and pick up more supplies. More drills. More pipe. More mud. More of everything that she needed for Rio to pursue her dream.

She drove back to an empty ranch. Storm Walker paced the huge horse pasture with endless, wild whinnies, searching for his four mares.

He wouldn't find them. They had been loaded up and shipped out that morning, before McNally arrived.

As Hope looked out over a pasture empty of black Angus, her own emotions echoed the stallion's desolate calls. Yet if she had it all to do over again, she wouldn't have changed one thing. Cattle, even her Angus, could be replaced. A dream could not.

Dry-eyed, she stood and watched the sunset mir-

rored in the half-full, utterly useless water trough. When she finally turned away, Rio was there.

"The Angus," he said. "Where are they?"

But there was no question in his voice. He knew what had happened just as surely as he knew the date: January fifteenth.

"McNally in Utah bought them." She smiled sadly. "He was delighted when I called. Said he'd regretted selling Sweetheart to me ever since he heard about her calves."

"And Storm Walker's mares." Rio's mouth was a flat line. "Did you sell them, too?"

"Yes. The Angus. The mares. The range cattle. Everything but Storm Walker. I paid off the second mortgage and bought enough supplies to drill for at least a month more."

"Christ."

Rio closed his eyes like a man who had seen too much, none of it comforting. His hands became fists that strained the leather of his work gloves.

"My degree in hydrology doesn't guarantee a well," he said harshly. "The money from the cattle should have gone for a new life for you somewhere else, not for a goddamned useless hole in the ground!"

"I didn't sell my cattle because I had faith in your degree." Hope went to Rio and put her hands on the coiled power of his biceps. Her voice was as strong as the muscles beneath her fingers. "I've seen you move over the land. I've seen your uncanny communication with it. I've seen you feel the presence of water be-

neath your feet. Your gift is as mysterious, as indescribable, and as *real* as my love for you."

She watched his eyes slowly open. They were the eyes of a man in torment.

"Rio, listen to me," Hope said urgently. "I know the water is there. If it's possible to drill down to it, you will. If it's possible to pay for the drilling, I will. And if it isn't possible, then we'll at least live the rest of our lives knowing that we did everything we could, no bets hedged, nothing held back. There's no shame or regret in losing that way. There's only shame and regret in not trying!"

He stared at her with sudden raw intensity. He didn't know that he made a choked sound as he reached out and crushed her against him. He only knew that no one had understood and accepted so much of what was hidden beneath his rough surface. He tilted her face back and looked into her beautiful hazel eyes.

"I'll find water for you even if I have to drill down to hell itself."

First Mason and then his grandnephew gave way to the exhaustion of working around-the-clock. That was when Hope came to Wind Canyon and stayed, working alongside Rio, blistering her hands and scraping herself raw on the unfamiliar equipment.

At night she lay down with him, falling asleep in his arms even as she felt their warmth and strength closing around her. Then she awakened beneath a glittering canopy of stars and felt Rio's mouth and hands caress-

ing her until she couldn't breathe for wanting him. She opened for him, cried for him, and he gave himself with an intensity that shook her to her soul.

That was when Hope dreamed that the search for water could go on forever, keeping Rio here with her on the Valley of the Sun. But she knew the dream couldn't come true.

And she couldn't stop dreaming.

In the icy chill of desert just before daybreak, Hope stood in front of the board, watching dials as Rio started drilling. The pressure gauge kept stuttering as though it was going to quit. It had happened before, but not with that particular gauge.

"Rio, can you come over here? I'm having trouble with the—"

The rest of her words were drowned out as daylight broke over Wind Canyon with a rumble and a drawn-out, wrenching groan of thunder. Hope made a startled sound and looked around for the source of the noise.

Rio didn't. He dropped the huge pipe wrench he was holding and sprinted to her. He snatched her from her station by the derrick board, all but yanking her out of her boots.

"Run!" he yelled.

She couldn't hear him, but it didn't matter. He didn't let go of her, so she had to run or fall. When he finally stopped running and half-dragging her along with him, she fought for breath.

"What's wrong?" she gasped.

"It's going to rain, beautiful dreamer," he said, grinning down at her. "It's going to rain for a thousand years."

She looked at the dry, cloudless sky and thought that he had gone mad.

Thunder rumbled again and the derrick groaned.

"Rio? Is it?" Abruptly she stopped speaking, almost afraid to believe.

"Yes," he answered, laughing exultantly. "We did it!"

Water jetted up out of the drill hole like a bright silver spear. It shot above the derrick and fanned out into a jeweled curtain of moisture that glittered with every color of the dawn.

After the initial, almost explosive release, the artesian fountain gradually shrank to half its former height. Slowly, elegantly, it began dancing in graceful spurts and pulses that reflected the massive, hidden rhythms of the earth.

Hand in hand, laughing, Hope and Rio ran back down the canyon. They didn't stop until the brilliant, transparent drops of water rained down over them. She held up her arms as though she would embrace the dancing fountain, but it was Rio she reached for. She licked cold silver drops from his eyebrows, his cheeks, his lips.

"Sweet," she said, laughing and crying at once.

He kissed drops from her eyelashes and lips. "Very sweet."

"I meant the water." She nuzzled against him. "I was afraid it might be a saltwater well. But it isn't. It's sweet."

"Not as sweet as you," he whispered.

She threaded her fingers into his straight black hair, feeling the warmth of him welling up beneath the cool veil of artesian water. "Thank you."

She repeated it again and again and again until the words blended into kisses. Passion raced through her and she arched hungrily up to him.

Rio felt her passion, tasted it, and pain drenched him more deeply than the pulsing water of the well he had drilled. Instead of responding to her searching, shimmering kiss, he gently lowered Hope until her feet were on the ground again.

The dawn wind blew through the canyon, whispering the secrets of the land.

"We should tell Mason," Rio said.

He dipped his head for a kiss so fiercely yearning that she trembled even as she returned it. He released her quickly, yet his fingers slid down her arms as though he couldn't bear to end the contact. His eyes were as dark as a night with no stars, as empty as the wind curling through the canyon, calling his name.

"Rio?" she asked, knowing that something was wrong but not knowing what.

Then she heard the long cry of the wind and knew. She started shaking.

"No," she said in a raw voice. "Not yet. Not now!"

She turned away from him and jammed her fist against her mouth, stopping the flow of words she had promised herself she would never speak. With every bit of strength left in her, she fought to control her emotions.

If she came apart now, it would destroy everything that she and Rio had, even memories.

She must not make him feel guilty for giving her what she had asked—*demand*ed—of him. She had

been strong so many times in her life. She had to be strong once more.

Just for a few minutes.

Just long enough to say good-bye to the man she loved.

Looking at her rigid back made Rio feel as though he had taken a punch to the gut. He tried to speak, failed, tried again. His voice was so tight it sounded like a stranger's.

"Hope, if I don't go now, it will just be worse when I do leave. And I will leave. I have to." Then, with a self-hatred that clawed at both of them, he added bitterly, "I knew I never should have touched you."

After a long moment Hope turned back to him, her face desperately calm.

"You gave me as much as you could," she said in a husky voice, "and that was much more than I ever expected from any man. Don't be angry with yourself for that. I'm not. I love you. *And I know that my love isn't enough for you.* I knew it even before I fell in love."

He made a rough, anguished sound.

Hope held her hand out to the brilliant dance of water, letting it wash over her fingers like the kisses she would never again share with him.

"You gave me my dream," she said. "I would give you your dream, but you don't have one, and the one I dreamed for you wasn't strong enough. So I'll give you all I can, all you want. The freedom of the wind."

"Hope." Rio's voice fragmented in a harsh kind of silence. His hands clenched again. "Oh, God, I wish I were a different man!"

"No!"

She closed her eyes, not trusting herself to look at or touch him. She heard his anger at himself twisting viciously through every word, destroying him, destroying her, destroying love.

"Don't hate yourself, Rio. If you do that, you'll hate me, too. I couldn't bear that." She took a ragged breath. "If you think of me at all after you leave, remember that I love you. All of you. Even the wind."

For an instant Hope thought she felt the warmth of his breath against her lips. Then the wind blew, taking everything away, the warmth and the man.

When her eyes finally opened again, she was alone except for the long sigh of air through the canyon.

"I love you, Brother-to-the-wind," she whispered.

Nothing answered her but the silver dance of artesian water.

Twenty-six



IN THE RESTRAINED silence that had become second nature to Hope in the weeks since Rio left, she drove Behemoth over the rough road leading into Wind Canyon. She made no attempt to talk to J. L. Hunsaker, the hydrologist who was going to pass judgment on the quality of Rio's well.

Hunsaker looked like he was on the downhill side of forty. He was lean as rawhide and burned dark from the sun. His clothes were those of a field engineer—sturdy and thick, like his lace-up boots. Even the wedding band on his left hand looked solid enough to take a beating. Streaks of silver shot through his dark brown hair, suggesting that the man himself had been hard used for his age.

But there was nothing worn about his eyes. They were a pure brown, narrowed, and penetrating as he studied the dry, harsh land. He glanced up at the looming Perdidas and the steep, eroded foothills that bordered the

canyon. Nowhere was there any sign of water, not so much as a seep with a handful of green grass around it.

Shifting in the seat, J. L. Hunsaker shook his head. "If you'd told me there was water here before we set out, I'd have said you were crazy."

Hope gave her passenger a quick glance and concentrated again on the road. No matter how many times she drove it, the road always managed to give her a few bumpy surprises.

"A lot of people thought I was crazy," she said in a matter-of-fact voice. "Including the Reno bank that hired you. That's why they're demanding a survey of the well before they even consider a loan."

She hadn't bothered to ask for another loan from Cottonwood Savings and Trust, even after the well came in. She would never again put herself in debt to anyone related to John Turner.

"Who brought the well in for you?" Hunsaker asked.

"A man called Rio."

"Rio?" Hunsaker turned toward her suddenly, his face alive with interest. "Big man? Black hair?"

"Yes." Her voice was clipped, almost curt.

"Well, hell, if the bank had told me that, I'd have saved us all a trip. If Rio brought in your well, it's as good as gold. Better," Hunsaker added, chuckling. "Cattle can't drink gold."

Hope tried not to ask, but her hunger for news was greater than her pride. Maybe Hunsaker had seen or heard from Rio.

"Do you know Rio?" she asked as casually as she could.

Hunsaker shrugged. "Can't say as anyone really *knows* Rio. We went to school together. Colorado School of Mines."

Again Hope looked quickly at the hydrologist.

"Yeah, I know. I look older than him," Hunsaker said. "I am. I did a stint in the military and Rio was barely sixteen when he started at the School of Mines. He had his master's degree before he was twenty. Most brilliant man I've ever met."

Her hands clenched hard on the wheel. Too hard. The truck jerked and swerved as though protesting. Automatically she brought the heavy vehicle back into line.

Hunsaker braced himself when the water truck lurched over a particularly rough patch of road. He didn't say anything about the hard ride. He was used to worse. At least this truck had a seat for passengers. He had been in some that had wooden benches just like a buckboard.

"In college at sixteen?" she managed finally. "That must have been hard for Rio."

"Not the school part. Like I said, he was brilliant. But the people . . ." Hunsaker shrugged. "Rio was alone a lot. Being part Indian is no picnic in some places around the West. A lot of men would have grown up real mean if they'd been treated like him."

She remembered how Rio had fought Turner, swift and skilled and ruthless. She had wondered who taught Rio to fight, but she had never wondered why he had learned. She had known.

"But Rio was different," Hunsaker said. "When he

had a bellyful, he'd just go out into the mountains for a while and then come back . . . soothed, I guess. Yeah. Soothed." He smiled rather grimly. "Course, the fact that he beat the hell out of more than one loudmouth son of a bitch soothed him from time to time, too, I imagine."

Hope's hands tightened on Behemoth's steering wheel until her knuckles were white. She couldn't bear the thought of Rio being hurt for no better reason than an accident of birth.

Like the woman who had been so blind and so stupid that she refused to have Rio's child. The thought of it enraged Hope.

She would give up even the well if she could have Rio's baby.

Maybe this time. Maybe February is the month my period won't come.

"How'd you meet Rio?" Hunsaker asked.

He had to repeat the question twice before Hope heard him. She was lost in her memories and the yearning that never left her, the dream that she couldn't help dreaming no matter how little chance it had to come true.

One impossible dream had become real. Why not two?

"People told him I needed a well," she said. "Desperately."

Hunsaker nodded. "Yeah. That's Rio. Always ready to give a hand."

Hope remembered those hands, long-fingered and lean and strong. Skilled with machinery. Skilled with

horses. Skilled with her. So much to give and take and share. So little time.

"Funny thing," Hunsaker continued. "Rio was good, real good, at his work. He could have been rich ten times over. He could have taken that money and crammed it down the throat of every bigot he ever met."

"That wouldn't be like him."

Hunsaker nodded. "Instead, he just drifted until he found someone that life had really dumped on. If they had the grit to fight, he'd help them. He didn't ask for cash. They paid him in crops or cattle or a place to sleep, whatever they could afford. Bet he's got stock pastured all over the West as part of his pay. But never money. No way."

"People paid him in dreams," she said.

"What?"

"Rio is a man without dreams. When he finds people who can dream, he helps them, sharing their dream for a while."

There was a long silence while Hunsaker watched the land and quietly reassessed the woman who sat beside him.

"Never thought of it that way, but you're dead right," he said finally. "You must have gotten closer to him than most."

She didn't respond.

Hunsaker opened the window, lit up a cigarette, and blew smoke out. Cold air poured in, but neither he nor she cared. Both of them were dressed for a winter hike.

"Damn shame someone didn't help Rio when he was still young enough to dream," Hunsaker muttered.

"What do you mean?"

"He had a hell of a childhood. Mother and father drank and he ran loose in the streets. When he got too wild they dumped him on the res with his grandparents and took off."

"How old was he?"

"Twelve, thirteen." Hunsaker took a hard drag on the cigarette and sighed. "Don't know what his grandfather did to straighten Rio out. That was one tough old Indian, from all I hear. Had about as much give in him as a rock."

Hope concentrated on the road, but it was Rio she saw, a younger Rio, defiant and lonely. "Are his parents still alive?"

"Not hardly. They wrapped their car around a telephone pole on the way home from a bar. Rio must have been about fifteen then."

She flinched and gripped the wheel until her hands ached. Love for Rio poured through her like a molten river, painful and beautiful at once. If she could have, she would have taken every one of his hurts on herself, healing him, freeing him to love. But that was even more impossible than her dream of sharing her life with him.

"Rough road," Hunsaker said. He grabbed the armrest as the truck jolted and bucked over a mound of rocks and loose sand. "Must be hard work for you coming out here, hauling water for your house and your stud."

Hope shrugged. It wasn't the road that had brought the grim lines to her face, it was the loss of the man she loved. She wanted Hunsaker to keep talking, to share

with her his memories of Rio, every one of them. Maybe if she could collect enough memories, enough pieces of him, he would be whole again—and so would she.

Hunsaker smoked in silence.

“You must be a friend of Rio’s,” she said at last. “You know a lot about him.”

Smiling, he drew on the cigarette again. “More like a fan. Rio’s kind of a hobby with me.”

Startled, she glanced quickly at the hydrologist. “A hobby? What do you mean?”

“I did my thesis on dowsing. Thought it was a crock of shit, no two ways about it.”

“You aren’t the only one.”

“Yeah. Well, Rio heard about my thesis. He looked me up and told me I was dead wrong. I didn’t take real kindly to it.”

Hope wasn’t surprised. For all his slow western drawl, Hunsaker was a hard man.

“What happened?” she asked. “Fists and boots at dawn?”

Hunsaker laughed. “No, ma’am. Even back then, I wasn’t a fool. Rio was maybe seventeen, but you forgot that when you looked him in the eye. He was one tough son of a bitch. I kept the argument to words and theories and formulas.”

“You didn’t convince him.”

“Nope. And I wouldn’t listen to him. So we went head to head on a piece of desert west of here. I had my compasses, survey maps, satellite photos, laser-sighting devices, the whole damned shooting match.”

"I wish I'd seen it."

Hunsaker smiled ruefully, remembering. "Not much to see. Rio found water before I'd finished my preliminary survey."

"Really?"

"As ever was. Made the hair on my neck stand straight up."

A shiver of memory went over Hope, soft electrical shocks flowing, Rio's eyes black and deep with uncanny knowledge.

Hunsaker shifted on the bouncing seat and stared out the window at the unpromising land. "Finding water is my profession, and I'm damned if I can figure out how water witching works." He stubbed out his cigarette in his traveling ashtray, folded it up, and put it back in the rucksack between his feet. "So I collect stories about dowsing while I'm out doing hydrological surveys. Rio's name comes up regular as the sun. He's been finding water since he was thirteen."

Hope made a startled sound.

"It's true," Hunsaker said. "Like dowsing. Odd but still true. You see, I know a lot of facts about Rio—his parents, grandparents, the wells he's found, the people he's helped, the horses he's tamed, the men he's fought, the women he could have had and didn't."

For a moment Hope felt light-headed, almost dizzy.

"But I don't know anything about him, not really," Hunsaker said. "Not even his name. No one does. A real private kind of man. Never shared his secrets with anyone."

My true name is Brother-to-the-wind.

Rio's words echoed in Hope's mind, making her throat ache and her eyes burn with unshed tears. He had shared so much with her, given so much to her, taken so much less from her than she wanted to give.

Behemoth slithered over the last sandy patch in the road, breasted a small rise, and stopped. Ahead lay a rippling silver bowl of water. A small artesian fountain danced above the surface of the new pond.

As though in a trance, Hunsaker got out of the truck. He walked to the edge of the pond without looking away from the silver transformations of the water.

Hope followed. The surprise of seeing water dancing in the midst of stone was new each time. So was the pain of remembering. She took off her hat and stood while the wind caressed her with restless, transparent fingers.

"I will be damned," Hunsaker said reverently.

After a few more minutes, he shook himself and hauled out some forms. His questions came in a rapid stream. As she answered, he filled in blanks with a mechanical pencil. When she told him how deep they had gone to get water, the pencil lifted. He looked straight at her.

"You got guts, lady. Anyone else would have given up halfway down."

Instead of answering, she simply watched the miracle of water in a dry land.

"No wonder you're broke," he said. "That's a hell of a lot of pipe, mud, and supplies." He paused. "Heard you sold everything but your stud to pay for the well."

She closed her eyes, haunted by memories of beautiful black Angus waiting patiently for grain.

"Yes," she said simply.

Hunsaker measured the height of the artesian fountain falling into the pond that filled the hollow where the well had been drilled. "How much has the fountain gone down since it first came in?"

"After the first few minutes it didn't diminish at all."

His eyebrows rose. "Good solid flow. Going to put a lid on it?"

"Not right away. I know I should, but . . ." Her voice faded.

"Yeah, I know what you mean. That pulsing water is something to see, isn't it? You know, you could put a small dam down in that crease."

Slowly she focused on Hunsaker. "What?"

He pointed toward a dip in the rim of land surrounding the pond. There, water rippled out toward the canyon floor below, creating a stream where none had ever before flowed.

"Drill a pipe through the base of the rim and let gravity do the rest," he said. "If that's not enough punch, install a wind-driven pump. That way you could have piped water and your artesian fountain, too."

She smiled, pleased by the idea.

For a moment Hunsaker simply stared at her. It was the first time she had smiled in all the hours that he had been with her.

"Don't worry about your ranch, ma'am. When the bank gets my recommendations, they'll lend you enough to get started again. It won't be a quarter what you need," he added bluntly, "because wells are dicey things. But you've got plenty of guts. You'll make it."

"Thank you."

"Don't thank me." He watched the rippling water with something close to awe. "Thank Rio. For a man without dreams, he sure as hell has made a lot of them come true."

Robert Moran's ranch was even more remote than the Valley of the Sun. Colorado's high, snow-covered mountains rose in jagged crowns against the cobalt-blue sky, but where Rio stood, the land was flat, dry, a frozen February landscape that offered no hint of the summer ahead.

"That you, Rio?" Moran asked, rushing out of his new barn. His breath was a silver burst in the instants before the wind swept it away. "Thought I recognized the truck. Coming to check on your cattle and the well?"

Rio didn't know why he was there. He only knew that, like the wind, he had to keep moving. He shook Moran's hand.

"No, I'm just . . ." Rio's voice died. *Restless, angry, hungry*. "Moving around, like always. How have you been?"

"Marti will be smiling to see your truck in the yard. She's in town right now. One of the kids had an ear infection. Other than that, all of us are healthy as horses and fat as pigs, thanks to the well you found for us."

"My pleasure," Rio said simply.

And it had been.

"You should see your cattle," Moran said enthusiastically. "They're multiplying like flies. I'm thinking you'll want to cull some. That's why I left word down to Rimrock for you to come see me. I didn't want to sell any of yours without you okaying it."

"Our deal was that you would treat my cattle just like yours. Nothing has changed."

Moran smiled. "Fine. I'll put the money in your account or in better bloodlines, whichever you choose."

"Better cattle."

"You got it. Come on to the house and put your gear in the spare room. Marti must have known you were coming, because she baked enough cookies to bury us chin-deep. After dinner, we'll—"

"I won't be staying," Rio interrupted softly.

"Of course you are. Marti would have my hide if I let you get away."

"Maybe next time."

Moran started to say something else, then looked at Rio, really looked at him, for the first time. Rio was drawn, filed down, honed to the kind of edge that could cut everything in reach.

"Well, sure," Moran said. "Maybe you'll see Marti on the road back."

"Maybe. Say hello to her for me."

"Sure. Where you going in such a rush?"

Rio didn't answer. He didn't know. He only knew that he must leave.

As he went back to his truck, the wind blew restlessly, freely. It combed his hair, tugged at his sheep-

skin jacket, and whispered to him about the woman who had looked at him, *seen* him, and loved everything she saw.

Even the wind.

Twenty-seven



GRINNING, MASON PUT a final twist on the connection that would bring water from Rio's well into the old network that had been serviced by the wells that had gone dry. May first was the beginning of a new life for the Valley of the Sun.

"Let 'er rip, honey!"

Hope turned the valve. After a moment, water churned and thundered into the cistern buried beneath her feet.

Behemoth had made its last run to Rio's well to bring water. She had replaced the ancient truck with an expensive, gleaming pipeline that snaked back along the old road starting from the ranch house and ending in Wind Canyon's shadowed depths. Within a week, other pipelines would be finished. Then there would be a network of thick silver straws leading to troughs where range cattle could drink during the dry months

of summer. Other lines had been laid so crops could be irrigated.

There weren't any cattle yet. Even with the new loan, she didn't have enough money to replace her herds. She would have to start with calves and go from there. If the crops this year were good, if the alfalfa and oat hay grew thick and rich, there would be enough money and feed to buy and fatten up beef calves in the autumn.

Autumn.

Rio had come to her in the autumn, telling her that he would find water. It had been in autumn that he had first made love to her while a cold wind blew.

The memory shook her even as wind had shaken the house that night.

Her fingers curled around the cold steel valve and she hung on, waiting for the storm of yearning to sweep through her, leaving her spent. Each time it happened, she told herself that her memories of Rio would grow dimmer with each passing day.

They hadn't.

They had grown even as the life in her womb grew, thriving in the secret places of her body, stronger with each hour. She could hardly wait until next autumn, when Rio's baby would be born. She ached to hold it to her breast and hear its tiny cries.

"Prettiest sound I ever did hear," Mason said with satisfaction, listening to the rush of water.

When Hope didn't answer, he glanced at her. The distant, strained look on her face told him that she was somewhere else. He frowned and bit back a curse. She

hadn't been the same since Rio left. It wasn't just that she didn't smile easily or laugh at all. She was just different. A woman now, no girl left in her.

The Valley of the Sun had always been important to her, but it was more than that now. It was everything.

In the three months since Rio had left the ranch, other men had come. They had asked Hope to church and to barbecues, to movies and to parties. Her answer was always the same, no matter how handsome or respectable the man was.

No.

Mason had chided her once, telling her that she should go out and enjoy herself. The look she had given him had been enough to make him flinch, but all she had said was, *I'm a one-man woman.*

The sound of a heavy truck driving into the yard between the barn and the house pulled Hope out of her autumn dreams. She looked at Mason. He shook his head.

"Nope," he said. "I didn't order nothing."

Rio! He's come back!

The thought was like lightning—hot, blinding. She didn't know that there was a flash of raw hope on her face as she turned and ran toward the sound. Nor did she know that every bit of light faded from her eyes when she saw that a stranger drove the truck.

"Lost?" she asked evenly as the driver rolled down his window.

The man was at least fifty, as weathered as the hills, and about as talkative. "Yer name Hope?"

"Yes."

"Where ya want it?"

"What?"

"Seed." He jerked a grizzled chin toward the truck bed.

She peered around the cab and saw the bags of oat hay and alfalfa seed. "I didn't order any seed."

He nodded and waited impatiently for her to answer his question so that he could unload his truck and get back to his farm.

"If I didn't order any seed, then that's not my seed in the truck," Hope pointed out reasonably.

"Rio sez bring it. I brung it." He stared at her, waiting to be told where to put the seed.

She stared back, speechless, a single word echoing through her mind and body and soul: *Rio*.

A look of exasperation crossed the stranger's unshaven face. "Where ya want it?"

Mason came up behind Hope. "You say Rio sent you with this seed?"

"Ain't this Hope Gardener's spread?"

"This is her ranch," Mason said.

"So where you want it?"

"I'll show you where to put the seed," Mason said.

" 'Bout time," the man muttered.

Having exhausted his well of small talk, the stranger revved his truck's engine and slowly followed Mason.

Bewildered, Hope watched the man back up to one of the storage sheds and begin unloading bag after bag of seed. He answered no questions, asked none, and refused anything more than a cup of coffee.

After the man left, Hope and Mason stood side by

side in the shed, looking at the unexpected delivery. Silently Mason pulled out a worn folding knife, opened a blade, and slit the top of a bag.

Smooth, rich, plump, the satiny contents cascaded from his hands and whispered back into the sack.

"Prime," he said softly, "really prime seed."

Hope didn't answer. She simply thrust her hands wrist-deep into the seed and lifted. When she poured seeds from one hand to the other, she saw fields green with alfalfa and shimmering gold with oats. There was thousands of dollars worth of seed stacked neatly in the shed, sacks pregnant with future harvests.

With Rio's seed she could begin rebuilding the Valley of the Sun.

When Hope slept that night she dreamed of Rio's child, her child, their child, running through fields thick with grain and sweet with alfalfa flowers. The dream slowly changed, filled with the muted thunder of rain. She woke up in a rush, only to find that it wasn't rain that had awakened her, but trucks.

She ran to the window and simply stared. A convoy of cattle trucks was driving into the ranch yard. Above the roar of diesels came the concerted bawling of yearling steers.

Rio?

Again, like lightning, the thought scored across Hope's emotions.

She yanked on her clothes with fierce speed, kicking into her boots even as she shoved her arms into her jacket.

When she ran into the front yard the sun was barely an incandescent fingernail hooked over Eagle Peak.

A broad-shouldered, bluff-looking man climbed down out of the first cattle truck's high cab. His motions were stiff, those of someone who had been on the road a long time.

"You Hope?" he asked.

She looked up into his ruddy, wind-roughed face. "Yes."

"Name's Martin," he said, holding out his hand.

Hope shook it, feeling as though she was still asleep, still dreaming. The sound and smell of cattle swirled around her on the dawn wind, stirring her. She had missed the earthy smells and plaintive bawls of cattle. She looked at them yearningly.

"Yeah, you're Hope, all right," Martin said, smiling. "He told me, 'Look for a woman with dreams in her eyes.' "

Hope's eyes widened, revealing hazel depths where both gold and shadows turned. "Rio sent you?"

"Sure did. Where do you want the calves?"

"But I didn't order—" Her voice broke. She swallowed and tried again. "Mr. Martin—"

"Just Martin, ma'am."

"Martin," she said somewhat desperately. She didn't know a gentle way to tell this stranger that he had made a long drive for nothing. She hadn't ordered cows because there wasn't enough money to pay for them. Not yet. Not until she harvested and sold a few crops. "I'm sorry. I can't afford to buy your cattle."

Martin shook his head. "Nothing was said about money, ma'am. Didn't Rio tell you we were coming?"

She shook her head mutely.

"Yeah, well, that's Rio. He was edgy as hell when I talked to him. Never saw a man so restless. He came four months early and didn't hardly even stay for a cup of coffee. Just gave me your name and told me to ship whatever I owed him down here."

"Down here?" Hope shook her head and fought for breath. She felt like she was drowning in the soaring dawn and the bawl of cattle. "Where are you from?"

"Montana, way up by the Canadian border. Don't mind telling you, it was some trick to comb these yearling steers out of a storm and ship them through the worst spring I've seen in decades." He smiled suddenly, his dark eyes alive with laughter. "Not that I minded. Not a bit. If Rio had said drive his cows to Hawaii, I'd have loaded them up and driven west until my hat floated."

She just stared at him.

Martin looked over to the pastures opposite the house. "That fence in the bigger pasture strong enough to hold back a few yearlings?"

Closing her eyes, Hope forced herself to breathe. The earthy smell of cattle was more beautiful to her than roses.

"Yes," she said, opening her eyes. "Follow me."

She turned and walked toward the big gate leading into the pasture. She didn't know where she was going to find food for all the cattle—there had to be hundreds

of them, and even now another truck was pulling up to the ranch. Although the winter had been mild, there hadn't been much rain. There wasn't much natural food for the cattle.

Then she realized that she could buy hay with the money she had earmarked for seed. Relief made her light-headed. She shook it off. She didn't want to miss one instant of watching cattle streaming back into the Valley of the Sun's empty pastures.

Yearling Herefords crowded down the truck ramps and spread over the pasture in a rich russet tide. Wind sighed and curled through the yard, making dust into a glittering golden veil rising with the dawn. The bawling of cattle rose to meet the cataract of sunrise spilling down the Perdidas' rugged slopes.

Hardly able to believe her eyes, Hope leaned on the pasture fence and simply watched cattle returning to her ranch.

Martin watched Hope for a long time before he walked up to stand beside her. She turned to him with a smile that made him wish she wasn't Rio's woman. But he didn't doubt that she was. It had been in Rio's eyes when he spoke her name—and in hers when she spoke his.

"They're beautiful," she said, emotion thickening in her voice.

Martin laughed as he looked at the wild-eyed, winter-lean yearlings fanning across the pasture. "You're a rancher, all right. Nobody else would think those ragged steers were beautiful."

She hesitated, watching Martin from the corner of

her eye, wanting to know how Rio had looked, if he was happy or sad, well or drawn out to a fine humming wire of tension.

Like her.

Restless. Edgy as hell.

Like Rio.

"I didn't know they were short of water in northern Montana," she said, fishing delicately for information.

Martin gave her an amused look. "Not the part I'm from. I met Rio a different way."

She turned and looked at Martin directly, silently urging him to talk, drinking each word the way thirsty land drinks water.

"Twelve years ago I found three men driving about forty of my cattle into Canada," Martin said simply. "I should have gone for help, but I was so damn mad I just waded right in. You see, those cows were every penny I had in the world back then."

Hope made a sound of sympathy. She knew just how he felt.

Martin shook his head, remembering the younger and much more foolhardy man he had been. He drew out a pipe, packed it with tobacco, and lit it with a special lighter. The pungent fragrance of his pipe mingled with the smell of cattle, dust, and a dry wind.

"Well, to make a long story short," Martin said, "those rustlers beat hell out of me and left me for dead. I would have been, too, if Rio hadn't happened along. He patched me up, got me to a doctor, and disappeared before I could thank him."

She wasn't surprised. "He wouldn't have waited around for thanks."

"No, ma'am. He had bigger fish to fry, and he fried them up real crisp. When I got home again a week later, every last one of my cows was back like nothing had ever happened."

Her breath came in swiftly. "What happened to the rustlers?"

"I didn't ask. Rio didn't say." Martin puffed hard, savored smoke, and continued, "He stayed and ran things until I was on my feet again. I told him that half of everything I owned was his. He refused it, saying even God only took a tenth, and God was a hell of a lot more useful than one crossbreed Indian."

Hope's eyelids flinched in pain for the man she loved, giving so much, taking so little in return.

"Rio never asked a thing from me until now," Martin said. Smiling, he added, "I've done right well for myself and Rio in those years."

Martin and his men left a few hours later. Hope and Mason spent the rest of the day turning on pipelines and putting out the hay that had remained after she had sold her cattle to pay for Rio's well.

Tired but smiling, Mason and Hope finally sat down to dinner. They had barely picked up their forks when two huge hay trucks rumbled up the road. She and Mason looked at each other and got up without a word. As soon as they reached the yard a familiar greeting rang out.

"Where you want it?"

Hope's mouth opened, closed.

Mason walked up to the first truck. The driver was a rail-thin man with a gray mustache that was no wider than the string tie that circled the collar of his pale western shirt.

"You sure you aren't lost?" Mason asked.

"Ranch gate said Valley of the Sun. That's where he sent me."

"He?" Hope stepped forward. "Are you talking about Rio?"

"Yes, ma'am. I'm Tim Webster. My wife Betty is driving the other truck. We brought our boys for the heavy work, because Rio said you didn't have any hands."

"Where are you from?"

"Southern New Mexico."

Hope took a breath. Northern Montana. New Mexico. Rio was everywhere but Nevada. "Show them where to put it, Mason. I'll see about some food for everyone."

The Webster family stayed long enough to unload the hay, eat, and drink quarts of coffee. When Hope offered beds for the night, the Websters refused.

"Thank you, but we need to get back to the ranch," Tim said. "Now, you remember what I told you. This isn't but a handful of what we owe Rio. You ever come up short of feed, you give us a holler. We'll start loading trucks before you hang up."

Their simple generosity moved Hope. "Thank you," she said huskily, "but I hope it won't be needed, now that the ranch has a reliable well for irrigation."

"Just the same, you remember. Without Rio, Betty and me wouldn't have a handful of spit between us. We don't forgot what we owe him. We never will."

The next afternoon two more cattle trucks arrived. Hope watched the dust plumes rise behind the trucks and she thought she couldn't be surprised anymore. She was wrong.

When the lead truck turned, she could see the name on its long black trailer: MCNALLY'S BLACK ANGUS.

Hot and cold chills chased over her skin. She had bought Sweetheart from McNally, and sold her back to him. Dazed, she watched the rig drive up. A big man in worn jeans and an expensive leather jacket climbed down. He walked up to her with a smile as wide as his broad face.

"McNally?" Hope's voice was ragged. "What are you doing here?"

He just kept smiling and looking around at the ranch where late afternoon sunlight flowed like honey across the land. "Didn't really notice it last time, but this is a pretty little place you have. Mite dry, but Rio said he fixed that."

Numb, she just stared at McNally.

Mason walked up and stood beside her, looking at the black trucks.

With a muffled groan, McNally stretched like a man who had spent too many hours behind the wheel. Then he looked at Hope and grinned. "Well, darlin', where do you want your Angus?"

She couldn't have spoken if her life required it.

Next to Hope, Mason laughed and swore softly. He gestured to the other driver, showing him the empty pasture gate where the Angus had been when McNally bought them back.

After the big rig was maneuvered into the opening and the ramp lowered, Hope's voice came back.

"My Angus?" she said, turning on McNally. "If they belong to anyone, they belong to Rio."

"That sure isn't what he said." McNally pulled on his Stetson's pale rim, steadying the hat against the playful tugs of the wind. Then he touched the side of the black metal trailer. "These cattle are yours, Hope. Every last hair on their shiny hides."

"I can't take them. I haven't done anything to earn them."

McNally looked at Hope with pale blue eyes that saw through her carefully controlled voice to the unhappy woman beneath. "That's not what Rio told me. He said you sold your cattle, your horses, your future, everything, because you believed in him. When anyone else would have cut their losses and run, you stuck it out. And you did it knowing full well what the odds against you were."

She didn't say anything, just shook her head.

McNally smiled strangely. "That reached Rio down deep, down where nobody ever touched him before. Kind of opened him up and made him bleed. These cattle are yours."

"I can't take them."

"Watch you don't get trampled, ma'am," called the driver as he freed the cattle.

Gently Mason and McNally crowded Hope back out of the way of the cattle that were coming out of the truck. She didn't object anymore. She couldn't. She had recognized the first of the sleek black cows to walk down the ramp.

"Sweetheart."

The cow's head came up at the familiar voice. She ambled down the ramp and nudged Hope with a broad, damp muzzle, looking for grain. Her calves followed her, grown and half-grown, dense black cattle walking down the ramp and drifting over the familiar pasture to pick at the new growth that winter rains had called from the land.

The wind followed them, ruffling their thick, glossy coats.

"I can't take them," Hope said again. She clenched her hands so that she wouldn't rub them down Sweetheart's solid barrel. "These cows never belonged to Rio. You bought them from me. They're yours."

McNally tugged on his hat brim. "Without Rio I wouldn't have a pot to piss in or a window to throw it out of."

Hope closed her eyes against the temptation of her Angus just within reach. The future of the Valley of the Sun had come home.

"Rio was only fifteen when he found water for me," McNally continued. "I gave him three Angus heifers and the use of my best bull. He never came back for them or their calves until this year."

Hope made a sound of protest.

McNally kept talking. "When it came time to sort out what was Rio's, we both just kind of decided that

these Angus had his name on them. Now, if you don't agree, you're just going to have to take it up with him. I sure as hell don't plan on crossing him."

Without meaning to, Hope found her hands rubbing through Sweetheart's warm coat. She opened her eyes and saw her fingers curling into the thick, springy mat of black that covered the cow's broad barrel.

"These cattle are Rio's," she said huskily. "For as long as the water flows."

"There's a new one in here," McNally said, going to the back of his own truck. "I'd recommend the barn for this one, but it's your choice."

Hope and Mason followed McNally to his truck. He opened the back and let down a stout ramp.

With ponderous grace, a massive black bull walked out of the truck. Every rippling muscle shouted the animal's fine breeding. Though the bull could have easily crushed the people standing nearby, he stood at the bottom of the ramp, waiting for McNally's signal. When McNally spoke softly, the bull watched him with calm, very dark eyes.

"No." Hope made a choked sound. "That bull is worth more than my whole herd of Angus put together. I can't take him."

"You want me to tell Rio that you couldn't find room in your barn for his bull?" McNally asked blandly.

"Yes. No." Hope's voice broke over the despair settling like ice in her, freezing her. "Damn you, Rio," she cried hoarsely. "I didn't want you to feel guilty about me!"

She turned and ran into the ranch house. The front door slammed behind her.

Mason and McNally exchanged a long look.

Then they led Rio's bull to its new home in the Valley of the Sun.

Twenty-eight



BEFORE DAYBREAK the next morning, Hope lay in bed, her mind a turmoil. Through the open window, wind brought the random scents and sounds of the newly arrived Angus moving through the dawn, snuffling at the hay that had been put out. The scents and sounds of her dream.

Rio's cattle. Rio's hay. Rio's seed.

Rio's well.

But the dream was hers, dreamed for herself and for the man who had no dreams.

Just as the sun rose over Eagle Peak and spilled down into her bedroom, several pickup trucks rattled into the yard. The slam of a truck door and a man's voice hailing the house brought Hope upright in bed, her heart hammering with a sudden wild hope.

Rio?

She pulled on her clothes, kicked into her boots, and raced down the stairs. The yard in front of the barn was

alive with pickup trucks hauling horse trailers. Three, four, five trucks, each pulling a four- or six-horse trailer.

Drivers climbed out, stretched, and called back and forth between the trucks with the rough voices of men who had been up all night drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes.

"Mornin', ma'am. You be Hope?" the closest driver asked when he saw her. The man was tall and thin, with a Tennessee accent running like a warm river through his speech.

"Yes."

"Pleasure, ma'am," he said, touching the brim of his hat. He turned his head, whistled shrilly through his teeth, and called, "Yo! Jake! This here is Rio's woman!"

Jake trotted over, shook Hope's hand, and asked, "Where do you want us to put our gear?"

"What?"

"Our gear, ma'am. Rio said you needed help."

"I can't afford to pay you," she said bluntly.

Jake's smile was as gentle as his teeth were crooked. "Makes no never mind, ma'am. We couldn't pay Rio, neither. Didn't stop him none. Won't stop us."

"But—"

"Ma'am," Jake interrupted softly, "I sure do hope you're not going to put us crosswise of Rio. He's got his heart set on us being here."

In the end Mason led everyone to the second bunkhouse, where they all pitched in and started cleaning. Other than Jake and the tall man from Tennessee, the rest of the "men" were hardly more than boys.

But they had handled cattle and horses all their lives, and it showed. Horses began flowing out of the trailers in a calm, multicolored stream. They were sturdy, seasoned ponies that didn't have to be told which end of a cow bit and which kicked.

Hope watched and told herself that she would sort it out later, when she was awake. Right now it was enough just to hear the familiar, rhythmic music of shod hooves in the ranch yard again.

"Ma'am?" Jake called.

"Yes?"

"This one's yours." He led Dusk out of a trailer. "Rio said how you liked to ride at night, and he was worried about you getting on a spooky pony."

Hope didn't know what to say. She hadn't ridden since she sold her mares. She had been afraid to risk her pregnancy on one of Storm Walker's friendly bucking sessions.

"Rio," she whispered to the wind. "How can I forget you when you keep sending me what is yours?"

Cool wind rushed over her face, her throat, her burning eyes.

But she wouldn't cry. She hadn't cried when Rio left. She refused to start now.

Rio stood alone on a high ridge, looking over land that had once been green with forests. The trees had long since turned to stone. The land had been rich with water, water that had sunk down into the earth, water that now was far older than mankind.

The wind moaned around him, tugging at him.

Well, brother, Rio thought wearily, you've blown me all over the West. Now what? What undiscovered country do you have left? What secrets haven't you showed me?

Currents of air as solid as hands buffeted him, forcing him to turn his back, close his eyes, and hang on to his hat. Abruptly the wind dropped to a whisper, and that whisper was a name.

Rio got back in his truck and started driving.

Fleeing.

But wherever he went, the wind was always there ahead of him, waiting.

Whispering.

In the days and weeks that followed, by twos and fives and tens, beef and breeding cattle from every state west of the Rockies arrived at the Valley of the Sun. Hope gave up objecting to the men who drove the trucks. Despite differences in age and wealth, the men all were alike in one way: they weren't going to disappoint the man called Rio.

As Hope's fifth month without Rio began, she thought she had accepted it all: the loss of Rio and the gain of the well, the loss of Rio and the gain of the cattle, the loss of Rio and the gain of his child. She thought she was strong enough to see him in every sunrise, hear his name in every wind, taste him in every silver drop of water from his well, remember him with every breath she took; she could take all

of that without destroying herself in endless longing for him.

And then one more afternoon came, one more stock truck drove into the yard, and one more man asked her, "Where do you want them?"

In unnatural silence Hope watched him lead horses down the ramp and into the corral. They were magnificent, long-legged mares with clear eyes and powerful haunches and life running through them like leashed lightning. Mares cakewalking across the yard, their heads raised high, nostrils flared to drink the scent of the wind sweeping down from the Perdidas. Wind ruffled silky manes and tails, whispered to pricked ears the secrets of the land, and then sped on.

Hope stood motionless, enthralled by the mares' beauty. A dream swirled within her, a vision of the future when Storm Walker's foals would grow sleek and strong, running through fields where grass never failed and water always flowed.

Rio's stock and her land and their child, and the artesian fountain he had found hidden deep within rock, ancient water flowing, an endless promise of life.

The Valley of the Sun was truly alive again.

Tears flowed silently, helplessly, down Hope's cheeks. She hadn't cried when Rio left or in all the long hours since then. But she couldn't stop crying now. To see her family's dream come true, her father's dream, her own dream, and yet to be alone within that dream . . .

Blindly she turned and made her way to the barn.

Jake and Mason saw her coming, then saw her tears

and her fumbling fingers as she grabbed a familiar bridle. Gently Jake took the bridle from her hands.

"Going for a ride?" Mason asked.

Unable to speak, she nodded.

"Then you'll want Dusk," Jake said.

She nodded again.

The two men went off and quickly returned with Dusk. Though it was a very mild day, Jake took off his big denim jacket and wrapped it around Hope.

"It gets right cool in some of those canyons," he said.

She didn't say anything.

Mason handed her the reins, and both men watched her ride out of the yard.

"She going to be all right?" Jake asked in a low voice.

"She better be," Mason growled, "or I'm gonna skin that thickheaded son of a bitch and use his hide to wipe my boots."

Jake smiled a bit grimly. "Holler if you need help. Me and the boys, well," he said, shrugging, "we owe Rio, but that's one damned fine woman eating her heart out over him."

Mason and Jake went back to their barn chores. They had stalls to muck out, grain to pour, hay and straw to bring, horses to groom, shoes to check: all the small, endless tasks that went into owning horses. After that there were fences to ride, pipelines to check, machinery to repair. The list was as long as it was necessary.

Just as the men finished up in the barn, a pickup

truck pulled into the front yard. A tall, broad-shouldered man climbed out and looked around slowly.

As one, Mason and Jake headed for him.

"Howdy, Rio," Mason said. "Come to check on your stock?"

Reluctantly Rio turned away from the ranch house. He still didn't know why he was here. He only knew that the wind had made it impossible for him to stay away.

"Hello, Mason, Jake," Rio said, shaking hands with each man. "How is . . ." His voice died, but he couldn't keep from watching the door to the house.

"The livestock are fine," Mason said, but it was the house Rio was looking at, his eyes shaded by the brim of his hat. Mason smiled thinly. "Come and take a look at all the changes."

"Not yet."

"Got something else in mind?" Mason prodded.

"Where's Hope?" Rio asked bluntly.

"Riding," Jake said, his voice neutral and his eyes burning.

"Where." It was a demand, not a question.

Jake waved his hand casually. "Out there. She's been real edgy. Spends a lot of time out on the range."

"She should be happy," Rio said in a rough voice. "She has her dream."

Jake shrugged. "She ain't."

"She cried for you," Mason said. "Don't ever hurt her like that again."

Rio hissed a word though his teeth and knew that he

should go. He stared at the house with dark, narrowed eyes.

"Where is she, Mason? And don't give me any crap about 'out there.' She knows better than to ride off alone without telling anyone where she's going. You know better than to let her."

"Who said she was alone?" Mason retorted. "Lots of prime young bucks have come sniffing around since you left."

For an instant something terrible flickered in Rio's eyes. Then he remembered the truth that he had discovered about Hope. She was a one-man woman. He was her man.

That wouldn't change in five months or five years or five hundred.

And he wouldn't change either. Brother-to-the-wind. Nothing had changed except the pain. It was worse every day, every hour, every breath.

"Where is she?" he asked bleakly.

"If you hurt her again—" Mason began.

Then Rio turned away from the house and Mason saw his eyes. However much Hope hurt, she wasn't alone.

"Well, *hell*," Mason muttered.

"Yes," Rio said, turning away again. "Hell."

"If you were hurting, where would you go?" Mason asked.

"The only place I haven't been yet—Wind Canyon."

"Nice place," Jake said blandly.

"One of Hope's favorites," Mason added.

"Is she there?"

The men simply watched Rio with eyes that held both sympathy and anger.

Abruptly Rio turned around and went back to his truck.

Dusk knew where to go without being told. Hope often rode her there. The mare took to the dirt road eagerly, remembering that the grass in Wind Canyon had grown lush and sweet around the new pond.

Hope rode without thinking about it, still lost in the moment when she had realized that she wasn't as strong as she had assumed she was. She was afraid she wasn't strong enough to live on the Valley of the Sun alone within her dream and not destroy herself.

But she couldn't let that happen. She owed it to Rio, to herself, and most of all to the child she carried.

So she rode blindly, tears welling over her cheeks faster than the wind could dry them. She would go to the miracle of Rio's well. Somehow she would find strength again as she had in the past. There was no other choice.

The mare stopped just beyond the rim of the artesian pond, where grass grew in a startling swath of emerald. Wanting freedom to graze, Dusk tugged at the reins.

Hope dismounted, leaving the horse in the patch of grass and finding another for herself. She sat without moving, remembering how it had been to be fully alive within her dream and Rio's arms. With memories came tears the color of artesian water streaming down her face.

Sunlight thickened into the rich orange and molten gold of late afternoon. The wind lifted, keening over the land. She didn't see the sun or hear the wind. She was lost in her memories and her broken dream, groping for the strength she needed to go on.

"Hope?"

His voice was from the broken dream, deep and warm, a richness that was like a caress. A gentle hand smoothed over her hair, calling her from her memories. She blinked.

And saw Rio through her tears.

For a moment her eyes blazed with returning life, a dream made whole again. But even as emotion swept through her, she understood that she was seeing just half of a dream. The wind had blown, bringing him back to her.

And it would blow again, taking him away.

The life that had blazed in Hope faded, taking the dreams from her eyes.

Rio called her name in a raw voice and knelt beside her.

She took his hand and cradled it against her cheek, wondering why half a dream took more strength to survive than a dream that was utterly broken.

He gathered her against his body as though she was more fragile than the dreams that had faded from her eyes.

"I'm sorry, I never meant to hurt you," he whispered. "Hope, please believe me."

He rocked slowly, stroking the cool silk of her hair, repeating his words over and over, hoping if he said

them often enough, they would take away her tears and replace them with the incandescent dreams that had once been there.

She put her arms around Rio and let herself drift within half a dream, too emotionally spent to do more than fill her senses with his presence. He eased her down into the grass, cradling her against his warmth, talking to her softly, trying to explain the wind. His husky words wept over her like tears.

"I've spent my life like the wind, roaming the land, looking for . . . *something*," he said. "Like the wind, I never found it. Then I came to the Valley of the Sun and saw you fighting for your dream. I wanted to help you the way I had helped other dreamers."

She lay quietly against him and her tears kept falling.

"Then I began to dream, too," he said. He brushed his lips over her soft hair. "I dreamed of a woman who loved the land more than she loved anything, yet she risked everything she loved on a drifter's belief that he could find water where none had ever been found before. I dreamed of a woman strong enough to stand against drought and soft enough to set my body on fire. I dreamed of a woman who offered me herself and asked nothing in return. I dreamed of a woman who looked at a half-breed and saw a man, and loved what she saw."

Rio's arms tightened even as he felt the emotion that shook Hope's body. He didn't know whether it was joy or rage, love or hate, that made her tremble against him. He only knew that he had taken the dreams from

her eyes and had left the emptiness of the wind in their place.

"My dream and your love frightened me," he said, finally understanding. "It was like a beautiful cage closing around me. So I ran and tried to find freedom in all the places I'd found it before. The land was there, but it wasn't the same. It didn't dream. It didn't reach into my soul and make me want to dream with it. There was nothing but the wind mocking me, wind as empty as I was."

With a deep, yearning sound, Rio kissed Hope, trying to say what he didn't have words to describe.

Her hands crept beneath his jacket. When she felt the tension of his muscles and his heat radiating through her, she tried to speak, to tell him that she loved him, but her throat was completely choked with tears. So she simply held him and watched him with eyes that accepted everything, even the wind.

"I came back to the Valley of the Sun," Rio said, trying to explain what he had only begun to understand himself. "The ranch looked beautiful, more beautiful than my dreams—until I found out that you weren't at the house. No one would tell me where you were, when you would come back, *if* you would come back. Even Mason. He just looked me in the eye, said you'd cried for me, and I'd better not hurt you again."

Rio held Hope tight and close, afraid that she would slip away from him as everything else had, even the wind.

He knew now what he had walked away from.

"Marry me, Hope. Dream with me. Love me as much as I love you."

"Rio . . ." Her voice trembled with tears even as she turned her lips to his. "I don't want to cage the wind. You'd hate me."

"Never," he said softly. "The wind taught me that it's empty, not free. Like me without you. You're my freedom."

He straightened for a moment and looked into her eyes, golden with tears and the setting sun.

"You don't—" His voice broke. He kissed her with a gentleness and tasted the tears that ran like molten gold over her lips. "You don't have to have my children," he said simply. "I know that's too much to ask of any woman, even in my dreams."

The words went through Hope like a wild wind, sweeping away everything but her love for Rio. She laughed and cried and whispered her love while she fumbled over the buttons of the denim jacket she wore, until she could open it and then the jeans and blouse beneath.

"Hope?"

Unable to speak, she took Rio's hands and moved them over the warm silver necklace she always wore, his gift to the future. But it was the woman beneath the necklace that stopped his breath. Her breasts were swollen, her waist thickened, her stomach rounded with the promise of future life.

Hope felt the sudden trembling of Rio's hands, saw the disbelief and the incredible hope in his eyes as he looked at her.

"Yes," she whispered. "Ours. Our own dream growing."

Rio bowed his head and touched the dream he had been afraid to believe in.

She trembled as she felt his lips move over her skin, felt the warmth of his breath against her breasts and the unexpected, agonizing heat of his tears as he laid his cheek against their child and whispered his love. His words and his tears and his touch told her that he would always be with her, as close as her heartbeat, as deeply a part of her as the water hidden far beneath them.

And like that water, their love would well forth irresistibly, bringing life to everything it touched.

The wind ruffled the sunset surface of the artesian pond, caressed the two lovers entwined on the grass, and then sang softly down the canyon, blowing over the land, blowing alone.

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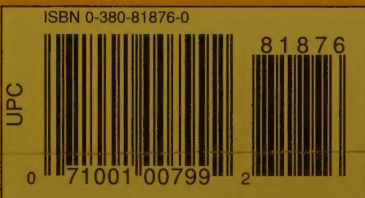
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